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PRINCE OF THE PLAINS



by

ANNE MacMILLAN

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"Are those your people?"

Mrs. MacMillan is to be congratulated on her effective use of our rich sources of prairie history in this story for boys and girls. *Prince of the Plains* gives us a fresh and vivid impression of life in this region during the exciting years of the early 1880's. With Mort and his friends we respond to the spirit of buoyancy and adventure which drew the pioneers to the wide open spaces in the days when the West was young. By arousing interest, and at the same time conveying authentic information, the author has helped the cause of western history in the schools.

LEWIS H. THOMAS,
Provincial Archivist

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FOREWORD

We feel that teachers who have spent long hours searching out the facts of the early history of Regina district will find this little book of valuable service.

It is the story of the Currie family who came to Pile of Bones in 1882. The story tells of the long, hard trek to reach the spot they claimed as a homestead. It moves from one exciting episode to another in that hard tough time, when the loneliness of the prairie combined with the pranks of nature to make life both dangerous and exciting for the settlers.

Life was never dull for Mort. He lived with his dreams and every moment was lived to the full. In his young mind he saw the West growing into what it is today and he felt himself a vital part of the foundation upon which a great empire would be built.

May we pay tribute to the men and women who, with faith in themselves, their country and their God, endured the hardships of pioneer life to give us the GREAT CANADIAN WEST.

The author wishes to thank all those who gave valuable assistance in the research necessary in the preparation of this book.

PRINCE OF THE PLAINS

CHAPTER I

WINNIPEG, 1882

Morton Currie stepped from the train onto a long, wooden platform, his brown eyes wide and inquisitive. He moved off as one in a dream.

"Stop gawking and look where you're going. Where you from anyway?" The voice was gruff.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to bump into you. I'm from Belleville, Ontario."

"Green Easterner, eh?"

"I guess so, sir." Mort felt a little uneasy as the man came closer. He was the biggest, blackest man Mort had ever seen in all his thirteen years. A little of the color drained from the boy's face as he saw the two Colts dangling at the man's belt.

Mort forced his gaze from the shiny butts to the stranger's face. He was sure there was a smile behind the beard that covered the lower part of that face, but he couldn't see it. The man's buckskin coat was heavily fringed and he wore a broad-brimmed black stetson hat, pinned back with a red feather, and high leather boots.

What fascinated Mort were the long rowelled spurs that jingled as he walked.

"Well, what do you think of Winnipeg?" The voice was not unkind.

"I don't know, sir. I've only walked from the station to this street."

"Portage Avenue, they call it. It's a bit dirty just now with thawing snow and mud. Winnipeg's been buried for the last six months. Biggest snow on record. The floods will start when the ice goes out of the river."

"Will the floods be bad?"

"Looks like it now. The Indians say that 1882 will be a spring to remember."

"Do you live in Winnipeg?" asked Mort, wishing he could find an excuse to get away.

The big man threw back his head and laughed. "In this shack town! Me, no, I don't live in Winnipeg. I'm for the wide open spaces, understand. What about a bite of dinner? Happen to be alone?"

"No, sir." Mort looked around. His father and mother were nowhere to be seen. He had no idea how far he had walked. "I'm with my father and mother and I thought—I must have lost them," he finished a little uncertainly. Then he gave a start and frowned at the big man.

"Did you say dinner? It can't be dinner time!"

"Twelve o'clock. That's what it says on my tin ticker," the man answered, holding out a huge watch. Mort looked puzzled.

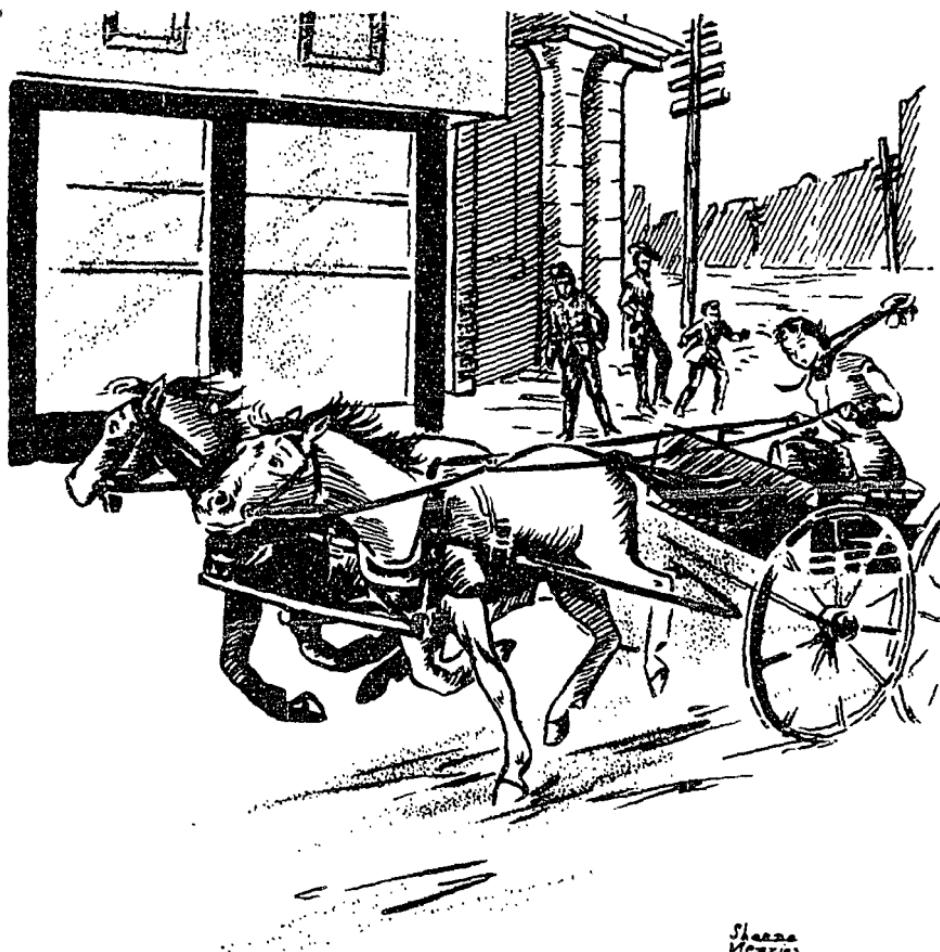
"Lost in the big city. That's bad," teased his friend. "There's an auction sale going on down there, by that big shed. See, where the crowd has gathered. Your folks might be there."

Mort looked in the direction indicated. A fair sized crowd had gathered but the distance was too great for him to distinguish anyone. There were few signs of life on the avenue. A man on horseback loped along easily; a team and wagon swung onto the avenue from a side street, while a yolk of oxen patiently plodded through the welter of mud and slush, hauling a load of wood. To their left, in the direction of the crowd, Mort could see two ponies, hitched to a buckboard, approaching at a smart pace.

The boy didn't see what happened, but something frightened the animals, for with a sudden lurch they reared on their hind feet, then lunged forward, the buckboard careening dangerously behind them and for a

split second, it looked as if the light wagon was going over. Then, with a jerk, the four wheels came to earth and the vehicle continued its mad flight behind the terrified ponies.

The watchers held their breath, as the runaway team missed the wagon by inches, but the slow moving oxen were directly in their path. Mort's hands were clenched. "Boy, oh boy, how those little fellows could go!"



The frenzied animals continued their mad dash.

It looked as if they were going to meet the oxen head-on, when without warning, they leaped aside out of the path of the oxen. The right wheels of the buckboard climbed the sidewalk---again the vehicle teetered and again it swung back into position, and the frenzied animals continued their mad dash down the street. Their flying feet seemed scarcely to touch the icy hummocks sticking up through the mud but the buckboard lurched dangerously. The street ahead was clear now and the driver was able to ease the team back into the middle of the road. Mort let his breath go in a sigh but his relief was short lived.

By this time, the running animals were almost opposite Mort and his companion.

"Jumping Jehosophat," exclaimed the man, "a woman's driving that there team."

They both jumped back to escape the mud and slush that spurted from flying feet and wheels as the runaway team dashed by. The boy's mouth and eyes went wide. He tried not to believe what he thought he saw.

"I have to find my dad," Mort spoke sharply.

The big man looked at the boy's face and said, "Let's join the crowd down the street."

As they moved away, Mort glanced over his shoulder to watch the buckboard as it slithered crazily through the mud. He noticed that the rider had turned and was following at a distance, no doubt careful not to further excite the team. They were making a right turn.

"That little lady knows what she's doing," said the big man. "She's going round on the square. That'll get some of the fever out of their blood before they get back to home plate."

"If there's no traffic, she'll handle them all right," said Mort. Suddenly, his face lit. "There's my dad, the tall man in the furlined jacket. See, he's looking this way. The one with the red beard. I don't see Mom anywhere."

"Hello, Dad, I thought I'd lost you. This is—I guess I don't know your name, sir."

"Call me Tom."

"Glad to know you, Tom. My name's Currie, Bob Currie. Belong in these parts?"

"There abouts. Are you buying land?"

"The thing I'm interested in, at the moment, is a team of ponies. They've run away with my wife. Any moment now they should come in sight at the far end of this block."

"I thought that was Mom. She'll handle them, Dad."

Bob Currie looked down at his son. "You think so?" When the boy nodded his father added, "I sincerely hope so."

"Here they come!" someone shouted.

They came, feet flying, bits between their bared teeth, nostrils wide, manes flowing in the wind and their breathing plainly audible to the watchers. The rider was now closing in on the team, which seemed to realize they were being trapped.

In his excitement, the boy was shivering, almost in time with the flying feet. "Oh, they're not! no, they can't be going around again."

At the exact, right moment, with the speed of forked lightning, the black man sprang for the nigh horse, caught the bridle strap and swung, drawing the animal's head down. The timing was perfect, for almost at the same moment that Tom grabbed the bridle, the rider swung to the ground and caught the other pony. The terrified animals stood trembling, their breath tearing at their lungs and their satin coats black with sweat and flecked with foam.

The driver rose, gathered her long skirts in her hand, placed one small foot in the mud on the wheel and jumped into Bob Currie's arms. When he released her, her knees refused to bear her weight. She swayed

and would have fallen had he not supported her. Mort brought a nail keg for her to sit down on.

"I guess my knees think they have taken enough for a while," she explained in a shaky voice.

"Oh, Mom, you were wonderful! Some team! I thought that was you when you passed the first time."

"Thanks, son. Bob, I want to thank the men who caught the horses."

When Bob turned to look for them, the one man had mounted and was riding away, but Tom was watching the owner who had appeared and was leading his tired ponies towards the barn. Bob brought Tom over to meet Mrs. Currie.

"Maggie, I'd like you to meet Tom, our new friend and the man who came to your rescue."

Mrs Currie smiled and held out her hand. "I'm very grateful to you, Tom. Those brutes didn't seem to be tiring a bit. I wasn't in any real danger," she hastened to add, "but I was getting terribly battered about."

The big man was slightly embarrassed. He bowed and said, "It was nothing at all. You put on a good show."

Mrs. Currie was a small, slight, young woman. However, what Tom noticed about her was that her eyes had the same eager light he had seen in Mort's. At the moment her cheeks were flushed and her eyes danced with excitement.

Bob smiled at her. "Well, I guess you've settled one problem for us. We're not buying those ponies."

His wife looked at him as if she couldn't believe her ears. "Oh, Bob, I want the ponies. Whatever makes you say that?"

"What makes me say that! After the show they've put on!"

"It wasn't their fault, Bob."

"It may not be their fault the next time either. And Tom may not be around to save you. No, these fellows are out."

"Listen, Bob, we were coming along the street at a nice easy trot, and oh, they have such a smooth even trot, they just danced along the street, when a large sheet of paper caught the right horse in the face, blinding him for a second. And, believe it or not, at that self same instant a train whistled. Now, what could you expect? You'd have run, too."

Everybody laughed. Mrs. Currie watched her husband closely.

"I think, mister, she can handle that team," Tom drawled. "You kinda stole the show, lady. Auction hasn't been doing much business lately. What were you interested in besides the ponies? Land? There is a big boom on in Winnipeg. They'll sell you anything you want, anywhere you want it, even in the bottom of a slough."

"Not for me," Bob Currie answered, laughing. "When I can get a hundred and sixty acres for ten dollars, that's good enough for me."

"Homestead, eh?"

"Yes, pulled up stakes completely in the east. Now we're headed for the prairies. From the stories we heard back home it should be pretty good."

"When you get there. You've a long trek ahead of you. You'll find it isn't easy going. Just where do you plan to locate?"

"Don't know exactly. Somewhere on the flat, treeless prairie, no stumps to clear, no stones to pick."

"Seems as if Pile O' Bones should suit you. Keep on going till you come to the pile."

"Thanks, stranger, glad to have met you. We'll have to get moving, Mort, get our outfit gathered up. We're taking the train to Brandon and we'll have to get loaded."

Mort followed close at his father's heels as they made the rounds. Within a few hours they had bought a tent and a wagon, but they exchanged the wheels for runners, as two feet of snow still blanketed the prairie. Mort made sure they did not forget to take the wheels along. They had a plough, a harrow, tools of all kinds including an axe, and food supplies to last several months. Among these mother had tins of pemmican, and strips of dried buffalo meat, for making soup along the way.

Besides these they had two oxen and a cow. Mother insisted on having a cow, which she called Daisy. The two frisky ponies and the buckboard were part of their equipment. Mother had won.

Later that afternoon the family found an eating place where they had buffalo steak and real dried apple pie. Next day they were off for Brandon, the end of the railway. Mort sat with his nose pressed against the window pane, looking at the level stretch of white reaching as far as the eye could see.

CHAPTER II

THE LONG TREK

They had been travelling for some time when the train began to slow down. Finally it stopped.

"Why are we stopping?" asked Mort. "I can't see anything."

"I don't know, son. Guess we'll just have to be patient."

"I'll go find the trainman," said Mort.

On reaching the coach door Mort found that a number of men were already off the train. He went to see what it was all about.

"What's the matter?" he asked the first man he met.

"We're in a snowbank. Stuck fast," answered the man. "Want a shovel? Everyone works around here."

"Stuck in a snowbank. The first of April! When does spring come on these prairies anyway?" asked Mort disgustedly reaching for the shovel.

"Spring'll likely be here by the first of July. Hot enough to roast geese then," answered the man as he continued to ply the shovel.

The train finally pulled into Brandon and Mort was glad to stretch his legs. He ran to where the men were starting to unload.

Suddenly he let out a whoop. Standing beside a beautiful black mare, whose satin pelt shone in the sunlight, was Tom. Mort was delighted. He felt as if he were meeting a friend in this strange, new land.

"You beat us!" he shouted.

"Midnight can beat any train on wheels," boasted Tom.

"Oh, is she ever a beauty! Look, Dad, here's Tom. And look at his mare! Do you think we can get horses like that in the West?"

"I guess a horse like that would be hard to find, even in the West," answered his father.

"You've said it, Mr. Currie. I thought maybe you wouldn't mind if I attached myself to your party for a bit."

"Glad to have you, Tom," and Bob Currie returned to his unloading.

"Let me give you a hand with that." Tom swung the heavy plough to the ground as if it had been a bicycle.

As the snow was still deep the runners were left on, making the wagon into a sleigh. This was soon piled high with their equipment. The party, with Tom riding beside the sleigh and Daisy tied to one of the oxen, started out into the great unknown. Mort, bundled in furs beside his father, thought they were like a ship of the desert moving across great, white dunes. Would they come to an oasis, with water and green growing things? His eyes hurt. He closed them tight, to ease the pain. In spite of the hurt, he tried to keep an eye on the ponies.

They camped early that first night besides a small wood. Mort set to work with his hatchet to get a supply of firewood and Bob Currie was glad of Tom's help in making camp. Soon the sheet iron stove had the tent too warm for comfort. The flap was pinned back to let in the evening breeze. Their supper of salt pork, bannock and pancakes with maple syrup, Mort thought, tasted better than any supper he had ever eaten.

Nothing could have pleased the boy better than Tom's suggestion, later in the evening, that he and Mort sleep in the sleigh. Wrapped in their Hudson's Bay blankets, with a fur robe over them and good clean straw beneath them, they were as comfortable as in their own beds. As Mort lay looking up into the vast blue of the sky, he felt that this was an adventure worthy of any ancient knight. His last thought was

that he was far too excited to sleep. The faint light of dawn was just beginning to waken the prairie when Mort made his first move.

"That's the shortest night I ever knew," he said. "I just get to sleep and it's time to get up." The smell of coffee was coming from the tent and Mort, remembering last night's supper, made haste to join the family. His teeth chattered and his fingers fumbled as he tried to dress in the half light.

Day followed weary day in their slow trek westward. The vast reaches of prairie were still clothed in their mantle of white. The party camped one night a few miles east of Shoal Lake. As usual, Tom and Mort had made their bed in the sleigh. It seemed to Mort that he had only fallen asleep when he was awakened by someone moving.

"Tom, what's the matter?" asked Mort.

"Shut your trap," hissed Tom. "Do you want to waken everybody?"

"No, but what are you doing?" whispered Mort.

"I'm getting out. Don't you breathe a word or I'll--You don't know me--Never saw me, see. Maybe I oughta tie you up."

"No, no, Tom," begged Mort in a shaken whisper.

"You gonna . . . ?"

"No."

There was no moon, but the night was clear and starry. The sky was that deep, cobalt blue which makes it appear almost black in the darkness. Mort lay shivering, as he watched Tom take the saddle from the sleigh-box, throw it over Midnight's back and draw the girths tight. Tom mounted and walked the mare a few paces from the camp. Then he touched her flank lightly with the spurs. She leaped forward, her nimble feet scarcely touching the frozen snow. Horse and rider disappeared into the night.

With the silence of the prairie night whispering about him, Mort lay mystified. If those cold, distant lights winking at him in the heavens could talk, would they know the answer? They were now following Tom in his mad, night ride. Why did he want to run away? Where was he going?

Mort had become very fond of Tom during the days they had been travelling together. The man Mort saw tonight was not his friend. He was too frightened to sleep. Dawn came at last.

"Where's Tom?" Bob's cheery voice was a welcome sound to Mort.

"Is he gone?" Mort shut his eyes tight. There was a sharp sting behind his lids.

"Gone? What makes you think so?"

A deep red crept over Mort's face. With head lowered he got into his clothes mumbling something about Tom's bed being empty. There was a large tin basin on a wooden box by the tent door. Here, Mort doused his head and face with cold water. He came up looking like a bad case of scarlet fever.

Bob grinned good naturedly at the boy. "Don't worry, son. I didn't expect he'd be with us this long. He's not interested in us."

"Dad, what is he interested in?" The words tumbled out.

Bob shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

By mid-morning they pulled up at Shoal Lake and Mort had his first glimpse of the Mounted Police. He stared openly at the tall, young man coming towards them, booted and spurred, wearing the scarlet and gold of the White Queen.

"Howdy, stranger, you travelling alone?" The voice was brisk and friendly.

"Yes," answered Mr. Currie with his ready smile. "Slow going, can't do more than fifteen miles a day. One day we made twenty."

"That's good going with oxen. Twelve is about average. Don't mind if I search your outfit? Routine, you know, can't let any whisky in. Bad for the Indians."

"You won't find any whisky here, but go ahead. It's all yours." Bob took out his tobacco and began filling his pipe. Then he and Mrs. Currie moved off to look about. Mort stuck to the Mountie.

When the officer was satisfied there was no whisky, he turned to the boy. "Well, young man, what are you going to do on these prairies?"

"Oh, sir, I'd like to be a Mountie. Do you think I could ever be a Mountie?"

"Sure thing. Eat plenty, work hard, obey the law and perhaps some day you may be a Mountie."

"I'll sure try, sir."

"By the way, did you happen to see a black bearded man and his black mare, *Midnight*?"

"Yes, we saw him in Winnipeg. He wanted to take me to dinner."

"You don't know where he might be now?" asked the officer.

Mort shook his head, his eyes searching the Mountie's face.

"Why do you want Tom?"

"Whisky smuggling." Seeing the look on Mort's face, the officer hastened to add, "Don't worry, he's no doubt across the border by now. If he stays there we won't bother him, but he'd better not come back here. However, if you're going to be a Mountie, you'll have to learn that the law must be obeyed, even when it hurts."

Mort nodded, his face very serious.

"That's all. Good luck to you," said the officer turning to Mr. Currie who had strolled up at that moment.

"Do you always make a search here? Ever find anything?"

"Indeed we do. This is one of the smugglers' favorite crossings, or used to be. We've made it rather hot for them."

As they were preparing to leave, Mort turned to the Mountie.

"Would you please give me your name? I'm going away out there," said the boy waving his arm to indicate somewhere in the distance. "I might see you again."

"My name's John Stuart. The boys call me Johnny. And yours...."

"Morton Currie. Mort for short."

John Stuart held out his hand to the boy. "Good-bye, Mort, till we meet again."

Now, that the days were becoming warmer and the snow was disappearing, Mort and his mother could ride in comparative comfort in the buckboard. Now, too, the sleigh had become a wagon, by exchanging the runners for wheels. Even though the days were warmer, the frosts were still heavy at night making travelling increasingly hard. The creeks were badly swollen now by melting snow and the crossings were difficult.

They camped early one night after a difficult crossing. The day had been raw and unpleasant and towards evening the wind freshened to a gale from the southeast. Later that night the rains started a heavy drizzle which was to keep up for several days. Bob arranged a tent over the wagon making a real prairie schooner out of it and mother went back to ride in the wagon.

"Now," said Mort, "it is a ship of the desert, only we have mud instead of sand."

Our travellers were beginning to meet a few Indians on the trail.

Mort thought they were a strange unfriendly lot. After three weeks on the trail the Curries were nearing Fort Qu'Appelle. April the twentieth they made camp within sight of the Fort.

The camp was set up and the fire going, the smoke making a gray plume reaching into the sky. Mort, standing a little distance from the camp, was looking away to the eastward. Finally he called, "Dad, do you see anything moving?"

Mr. Currie, his eyes red and swollen from looking at so much snow, could see nothing at first. Then as he continued to look he could make out black objects, looking like houses on wheels, swaying toward them.

Slowly he nodded his head. "We're going to have company."

"Friend or foe, I wonder," whispered Mrs. Currie.

"Friend, we hope. In these wide open spaces all should be friends."

Mort was standing at some little distance from his parents, wide-eyed and wistful, watching the moving objects. "Who could they be?" he wondered. His eyes were almost as well trained now as the Indians. To him the oncoming wagons looked much like their own outfit.

He was startled by his father's voice. "Mort, you look after your mother and the camp. I'm going to ride out to meet these travellers."

Mort felt lonely and just a bit worried, standing guard on that great empty plain watching his father ride into the dusk.

CHAPTER III

MORT MAKES A FRIEND

The moving objects, which appeared to Mort to be a large party, proved to be the wagons of friendly settlers trekking across the prairies like themselves. The newcomers had five complete outfits in place of one. They were still travelling on runners. The men told Mort that at times they had had to hitch all five teams of oxen to one load in order to get through a slough.

Mort drew himself erect, eyes shining as he announced proudly, "We did better than that. We only had one team of oxen and the ponies."

One tall man left the rest of the company and strolled to where Mort waited a little apart. "You people certainly had courage to start out alone, one man, a woman and a boy. Your father tells me you are going on, so are we. Going to make a survey for the government."

"What do you mean by a survey?" asked Mort, puzzled. He liked this friendly gentleman.

"We're going to divide the land up into sections and townships. If the government is to give people like you homesteads they will have to know how much to give each person. Each township will be six miles square, containing thirty-six sections."

"How big will a section be?" Mort inquired.

"A section will contain six hundred and forty acres. These will again be divided into quarters. One quarter or a hundred and sixty acres is what you will get for a homestead," answered his new friend.

"Sounds like an awfully big job. Where will you ever begin?" The boy looked off into the gathering darkness.

The man laughed. "We're going as far as Pile O' Bones; then we'll strike down to the border."

"Will you travel along with us? It would be nice to have company." There was excitement in Mort's voice.

"Sure thing. The more the merrier, but now we're going into the Fort for the night. They tell me we can sleep between clean sheets." The tall man smiled kindly at the eager young face raised to his.

"Oh, gee, sheets!" burst from Mort.

His friend laughed. "Never mind, my friend, you'll get them one of these days. Your camp looks very comfortable."

"It is," Mort replied loyally. As Mort watched the men make their way to the Fort he thought. "It's going to be nice to have company." It gave him a warm feeling way down inside.

Next morning Mort wandered off alone. His homespun breeks were worn and mud spattered. His leather jacket opened over a faded blue shirt. The heavy cloth cap was pushed well back on his dark curls and his mitten hands hung limp by his sides. There were great humps and hollows in the high, laced boots, caused by so much splashing through snow, mud and water, but at the moment he was quite unconscious of his appearance. He was fascinated by the scene before him.

The Fort was built on the banks of the Qu'Appelle River. All the buildings were painted white. Across the river Mort counted fifty-two queer looking tents, which he learned were Indian teepees. Around these were scattered Red River carts, travois, and hobbled ponies. Near the Fort were camped two companies of the Mounted Police in white bell tents, which stood out against the rising sun.

"I wonder," thought Mort, "if all those Mounties are as nice as my friend, Johnny Stuart?"

There was a great stir around the Fort. Mounties, civilians and Indians were coming and going as if on some definite business. Mort's brow was puckered as he tried to puzzle out what was happening. In the midst of all this confusion his thoughts jumped to Tom. Tom had not wanted to meet the Mounties.

So absorbed was he with his own thoughts that he had neither seen nor heard anyone near, until a hand on his shoulder startled him. He looked up into the face of an Indian boy a little older than himself.

Mort's ready smile lit his eyes. "Hello," he said. "Are those your people?"

The Indian boy nodded.

"What are they doing here?"

"Brought in winter's catch, furs."

"Will they be here long?"

"Maybe long time. Wait for Indians from Wood Mountain."



"Are those your people?" asked Mort.

"Will they live in tents, like that?" asked Mort, pointing to the teepees—"Nothing to do?"

"They will fish, good grass for ponies. They wait for Treaty money."

"Treaty money, what's that?" asked Mort, as he made a place for the other boy on the log beside him and motioned him to sit down.

"When your people took this land from our people the White Queen gave us money. My father says it's no good."

"What's no good?" asked Mort.

"The white men coming," answered the other.

"Why is it no good? We will cultivate the land and plant crops. This will be a great rich land, with large cities like the East, some day."

"It was better before," the Indian boy persisted stubbornly. "Then Indian worked for his food. Now he will not even kill prairie chicken at his feet. He would rather come to trading post for money."

Mort tried to figure that out but could only shake his head. He looked up suddenly and grinned at his new friend. "What do I call you?" he asked.

"Little Bear," replied the other without turning.

"Where did you learn to speak English?" Mort asked.

"At Mission."

The two boys sat on the broken tree trunk idly watching two men operating a clumsy scow across the Qu'Appelle River.

"Why isn't there a bridge across that river?" asked Mort.

"There was," answered the Indian, still gazing out over the water.

"Well, where is it? There's no bridge that I can see."

"Last winter biggest snow in twenty-five years, my people say. Water this spring take bridge. Government Agent, MacDonald, he built bridge."

The mention of the big snow recalled to Mort's mind that Tom had mentioned the floods in Winnipeg. Where was Tom now? Mort stirred uneasily and looked up.

Little Bear had risen. "Come," he said. "I take you cross."

"In that thing?" asked Mort, pointing to the boat lying where the men had beached it.

The Indian boy nodded.

"I can't swim," protested Mort, but Little Bear was already out of hearing.

Mort dragged his reluctant feet to the water's edge. His friend was busy untying the ropes which anchored the boat. Mort could see now that the scow was well constructed. The sides were built up high enough to cling to. The ends were open to allow for easier loading. He managed a weak little smile as Little Bear pointed and said, "Get on."

Mort tumbled over the side, and being unable to stand, sat on the bottom, his feet straight out in front of him.

Little Bear took a pole and began to push off. Mort was fascinated as he watched the Indian's body pick up the rhythm of the boat, pitching on the choppy surface of the water. He decided to try it. His heavy soled shoes were no match for the Indian moccasins and he came down with a thud on the slippery planks.

When they reached the middle of the river Little Bear had to work hard to keep the craft from being carried down stream by the current. Mort could handle a boat, so he scrambled to his knees, took the other pole and struggled as best he could to steer.

One big wave went completely over him. He spluttered, shook the water from his eyes but didn't relax his hold on the pole. By the time they had reached the calmer waters on the other side, he, too, had found his sea legs.

Mort had much more confidence on the return trip. In fact, he almost enjoyed it. Standing well to the back of the scow, he made a fair job of steering. Only once, where the river was swiftest, did he lose his footing and then he was pitched to his knees, but quickly regained his feet.

Camp had been set up and mother had a good fire burning when the boys returned. Their outer garments were soaked. Mrs. Currie did not let them out of her sight again until they were thoroughly dry. Then Little Bear went back to his people and Mort wandered off alone.

His young heart was thrilled with the beauty of the spot. The Fort nestled in a deep valley a short distance from the Qu'Appelle River, which flowed between a chain of lakes, called Fishing Lakes.

Mort was never to forget that evening. It was as if the whole scene had been painted on a canvas—the river, the picturesque Indian teepees, the white tents of the Mounties, and best of all the Mounties themselves, in their scarlet and gold, moving about. Then, too, he saw his first prairie sunset. He was sitting alone in the buckboard watching the changing colors.

As the bright sun dipped below the horizon, a riot of color splashed the western sky, changing from yellow to deep wine red. Even the fleecy clouds in the east were dipped in palest rose. Mort sat there fascinated, until the colors had faded to pale yellow green and were finally lost in the purple haze of evening—a boy and his dreams looking into the future.

It was not yet light when Mort heard a sound outside the tent. Lifting the flap, so that he might peek out, he saw Little Bear on his knees so close that he made Mort jump.

The Indian boy put his fingers to his lips and whispered one word, "Come."

"Now?" breathed Mort, with a puzzled frown. Little Bear nodded.

The white boy listened to make sure his parents had not been disturbed. Then, taking his clothes, he rolled under the side of the tent and shivered in the cold morning as he dressed.

Meanwhile his friend had slipped back to the Indian camp as noiselessly as he had come.

"Gee, I hope I can move like that, some day," thought Mort.

Little Bear was waiting at the corral where the horses were kept. As Mort came up, he advanced to meet him leading a pinto pony. The Indian boy threw an arm across the pony's neck and the horse nuzzled his cheek. He spoke a few words in the horse's ear, sprang to his back and galloped off across the prairie. Mort gazed after him, with longing in every line of his young face. Then, wheeling sharply, horse and rider returned at the same pace. The redskin grinned down at Mort.

"Like him?"

"He's a beauty! Boy, how he can run!"

Little Bear slid from the pony. "Get on," he nodded to Mort.

"Oh," Mort gasped, "Could I?"

Again Little Bear nodded, and pushed Mort towards the pinto.

Mort mounted easily but the pinto, sensing a stranger on his back, was wary. He minced along as if his burden were distasteful to him. Mort walked him a few steps and back.

"How do you make him go?" Mort asked a bit mystified.

"You have to have the magic. I teach you. If you love horses you can ride him. You like my pinto?"

"Very much." Mort stroked the horse's face and under its chin with long rhythmic strokes. The pony turned a speculative eye on this newcomer.

The Indian boy watched him closely. "You'll do," he said softly. "You take him. I teach you magic."

Mort frowned. From his earliest childhood he had been taught never to accept gifts from strangers. Surely, Little Bear wasn't offering to give him this amazing creature. How could he ever say "No!" Finally he got his voice and the words tumbled out.

"Oh, Little Bear, I cannot buy your pony. I have no money."

The Indian boy looked hard at Mort, then with his hand under the pinto's chin he led the pony back to the corral and put him in with the other horses. Little Bear turned towards his own camp. Mort hadn't moved. What would the Indian boy do? Had he lost his friend as well as the pony? he wondered.

Then he noticed, Little Bear had stopped. He was coming back.

The Indian boy stood looking at Mort, whose brown eyes were almost level with his own.

"Don't be angry, Little Bear. I have nothing to give you for the pony. I cannot buy it."

Little Bear grunted. "Money White man's Manito (Indian name for God). Your father buy him? No?"

"What will your father say? Will he let you sell the pony?"

"Pinto mine. Call him Wi-ya-ka (Wee-yah-ka), means feathers. Fly like feathers. My father glad you buy my pony. We friends."

"It would be wonderful to have a good pony," said Mort thoughtfully. "If he were my pony I would still call him Wi-ya-ka. Wi-ya-ka, I like that name."

"One must have pony in this land. You buy my pony, we friends, I go with you. My father will let me teach you prairie secrets."

When his parents were up, Mort had little difficulty in persuading his father to buy the Indian pony. Then as the sun climbed higher in a cloudless sky, the two boys rode into the West, breaking the trail for others to follow. They were headed for Pile O' Bones.

CHAPTER IV

THE LEGEND OF THE BONES

Shortly after leaving Qu'Appelle the rains increased. The day that began with such promise proved false, as our friends were to learn often happened on the prairie. A biting wind piled up the heavy moisture laden clouds. Sleet lashed the boys' faces making conversation impossible and rain fell continually throughout the day. Alone, now that Mort was riding ahead with Little Bear, Mrs. Currie drove the ponies—Cap and Deck she had named them. With a canvas umbrella draped over the buckboard and a ground sheet wrapped about her, she was not too uncomfortable.

They found Pile O' Bones creek swollen, by the spring floods, to a mighty river and still rising. On reaching the ferry, operated by the Mounted Police, Mrs. Currie drove the ponies aboard, sitting like a queen on the high seat of the buckboard. As other travellers were waiting, the ferry was soon loaded to capacity. Bob insisted on swimming his oxen, and promised faithfully that he would anchor the box securely to the wagon before taking to the water.

Mort and Little Bear watched proceedings closely. The ferry looked like a huge flat bottomed boat, with a railing on either side. When the loading was completed a bar was slipped in place across the back. The front was left open. Mort was especially interested in the way the ferry operated. He could see ropes that stretched from shore to shore. A man on board worked a machine, which pulled on the ropes, and the ferry began to draw away from them.

"Pretty slick," Mort announced, nodding his head vigorously.

Bob watched proceedings for a few minutes, then turned to give his attention to his own outfit. A sudden

shout from Mort brought him to a standstill. He turned and retraced his steps. The ferry was near midstream. He could see that one of the ponies had become restive and two men, at its head, were trying to quiet it. The next moment the watchers gasped. The pony was in the water and had taken the two men and a large part of the load with them.

All this time Mort had been watching wide-eyed. Now he glanced at his mother to see if she appeared worried...if those two ponies ever took a notion to run now... But both she and her team seemed quite unperturbed.

The ferry stopped. Men shouted. "Throw them a rope. Throw them a rope. The fellows can't swim."

One of the victims had his arm around the horse's neck and was holding the poor animal's head under water. The shouting started again. "Tail, tail, grab the pony's tail."

The man went under as soon as he let go his hold on the horse. Those on shore gasped as they saw him go down and no one breathed until his head reappeared. The other man had at least been able to keep himself afloat. When the men on the ferry tossed a rope he succeeded in fastening it around his companion's waist and the drowning man was hoisted up. Soon the two men were safely back on the ferry but the spirited animal was dead.

"All men should swim," Mort muttered, talking to himself. "If I live in this country I must learn to swim."

"Humph," grunted Little Bear. "Drown horse. Yes, we will learn to swim."

The boys were saddened by the accident and went about their tasks in complete silence. They helped Bob anchor his load, then mounted their ponies and one on either side of the team to guide the oxen, headed into the water. All went well, until the oxen struck bottom

on the far side and the wagon wheels sank into the soft mud. Then the stubborn creatures refused to move.

Try as they would the boys could not induce the oxen to budge. Each moment both animals and wagon were sinking deeper. Just as Bob and the boys were preparing to unload the wagon, a big man from the ferry, in hip boots, came running with chains. He and Bob passed these around the axles and hitched the boys' ponies to them. But the small animals could make no impression on the heavy load.

By this time some half dozen men were standing looking on. "You young bucks get in here and lend a hand," shouted the big man. The men had no liking for the task. They knew well just how far that wagon would have sunk. However, they came in smiling.

"Now," said the big fellow, "take hold of those wheels and when I shout everybody heave."

On the word, "Go," men and horses threw all their strength against those buried wheels. They were rewarded—first, by a slow hissing sound and then an explosion like the crack of a balloon, as the sticky mud released its hold and the wagon lifted. When the oxen felt the weight ease they struggled to pull their feet from the mud and ambled slowly to shore.

When all were safely across, camp was made. The boys built a roaring fire. Before night the rain had turned to snow which, lashed by a strong wind, fell in angry blizzards.

Being thoroughly warmed by a bowl of hot soup by the fire, Mort was prepared to relax and enjoy the comfort of the tent, but Little Bear beckoned him to come out. "We must find wood," he shouted above the storm.

"We have all the wood we need for tonight. Tomorrow we'll get more as we travel."

"We will get wood tonight," persisted the Indian boy.

"But why?"

"You will not travel tomorrow. See that snow. Three days' storm."

"Of course we'll travel tomorrow. This is May. There can't be much more snow in May."

"You will see. We will get wood."

Reluctantly Mort followed his friend out into the storm. On the bank of the creek they came to a clump of trees. Here they cut a good supply of dry wood, which, tied in bundles, they strapped to their ponies' backs and headed for camp.

Dusk had closed in on them. Mort became confused in his directions and did not know which way to turn. Little Bear took the lead and the pinto followed. Mort did not interfere, though he had the confused feeling of a person going in the wrong direction. He was more than a little relieved to see the flicker of their campfires.

Little Bear's prediction proved to be right. For two days and three nights they were held up by the fury of the storm. The discomfort of this delay was relieved somewhat by the fact that, thanks to the boys, there was no lack of fuel in their camp. Seeing no sign of fire in the other camps, the boys braved the blizzard to take armfuls of their wood to the half-frozen campers.

After the third night of blizzard, morning broke over the prairie clear and serene. "Gosh, what kind of a country is this anyway? Winter one day—summer the next," Mort exclaimed in disgust.

Little Bear gave Mort one of his rare smiles. "That is right. Only strong can live on prairies. You strong. You brave."

"What makes you say that?"

"If you were not brave you would have turned back. You and your family alone would not have come all this way. Little Bear will help you."

From here the going was hard. The days were warm but the nights were still cold. Each morning the ice had to be broken. Sometimes the oxen baulked and refused to break through. Here again they were fortunate in having Mort's friend. He guided them safely around many an alkali slough.

"You drive in there, horse and rider will disappear," he warned.

Our travellers were to learn that certain sloughs, surrounded by a white chalky substance, were to be avoided. The water was not good to drink and the mud seemed to suck objects down like quicksand.

The boys, wearied by the monotony of the trail, put their horses to the run and were soon mere specks in the distance. Mort was to learn that his Pinto could hold his own against Little Bear's buckskin. The boys' cheeks were red and their eyes shining when they reined in their horses.

"We will ride ahead. I want to show you something," said Little Bear.

"Will the others be all right?" asked Mort, his anxiety showing in his face.

"Yes, they just follow trail now," answered Little Bear.

Mort could now see a number of scattered tents in the distance.

The Indian boy pointed. "That's Pile O' Bones," he said.

"Is that all the town there is? Those few tents!"

"That—Pile O' Bones," repeated Little Bear.

Mort's face fell but the disappointment was momentary. After the hardships of the trail, he wouldn't worry too much about not finding a city. The long trek was ended. He wanted to shout! To tell the world, they had arrived! He turned in his saddle and looked back. He would ride back and tell the others, but the

Indian boy caught his horse's bridle. "They will come soon. I will show you pile."

They rode on in silence. Mort was beginning to realize how alone they were going to be on these prairies, these wide open spaces with nothing as far as his eyes could see. He looked around to see how close the others were. The ponies and oxen had come to a stop near the creek. He and Little Bear were leaving them behind.

Then Little Bear was speaking. "Look," he said.

Mort looked. He saw two converging piles of earth narrowing to the space of a few feet. These opened into a round circular plot. The Indian boy pointed. "That called pound," he said.

"What is it for?" asked Mort.

"Buffalo killed there," replied his friend. "Ota-Sa-Wa-Pa-Win (Indian lookout) we passed. Indian watches for buffalo. Medicine man leads them by strange sounds. Young men on ponies drive buffalo in pound. Put poles across. Young men kill buffalo."

"You mean you drive them in there and then kill them?" Mort was horrified.

The Indian nodded.

"But that isn't fair. The animal hasn't a chance to get away. That isn't hunting."

"Before white man came Indian killed for food, clothing and tents. Now white man wants money; Indian kills many buffalo."

Mort's face was serious. Then, Little Bear was pointing to a huge pile glistening in the sun. "It took many buffalo to make that pile," he said.

The boys rode up to the pile, which stood some six feet high and had a diameter of forty feet at the base. The structure showed great artistic skill. The skill of a people who live close to nature. Mort turned from studying the pile to study his friend's face. Little Bear's face told him nothing. He turned again to the Pile and slowly shook his head.

"Why do they do it?" he asked. "Pile the bones up that way, I mean."

"My people think buffalo will always come where bones of dead are. Pile high, see long way, buffalo come."

"When will they come again? Will they come this fall? This summer? Perhaps I will go on a buffalo hunt." Mort's voice was eager and his eyes shining as he looked at his friend.

"Buffalo will not come. Buffalo came this spring. My people say they will not come in big herds again." Little Bear sat gazing wistfully at the white, bleached bones.

"That is why my people are afraid. We will have no meat."

"They will not come again!" exclaimed Mort. "Do you mean there will be no more big buffalo hunts?"

"Everything changes. Buffalo are gone. Gone to give white men money," Little Bear mused.

"And Red men, too," Mort retorted with considerable heat. "You sold the skins to white men for what you wanted most. You got it. Then what did you do with the meat?" Mort added as an after thought.

"Women made pemmican. Traders liked to take it with them. It keep long time. Women put the dried meat into skin bags and pound it till all broken up. Fat left in. Made it keep longer. Sometimes mix berries with meat to make meat sweet."

The boys were so absorbed in their own doings that they had not noticed a rider approaching until he was beside them.

"Dad!" exclaimed Mort, "where did you come from?"

Bob smiled. "Left the others back there. They're sure they have found the exact spot where the railway will pass and the town will spring up."

"Maybe, too," said Little Bear. "Indians like that place."

"Well, I had to come and see what you fellows were up to. Afraid I might miss something. That's an amazing pile. Is it a cairn, built in honor of someone?"

"Buffalo," answered Little Bear.

Bob was amazed at the quantity of bones. Not only was there the pile but all along the creek were piles of bones. He shook his head. "This must have been a huge slaughtering ground. Why?"

"Creek is here. Buffalo come to drink. Butte, you passed out there," said Little Bear, pointing to the east, "make good lookout. See buffalo long way off. Land flat, good to stretch skins."

Bob and the boys had wandered some ten miles beyond where the rest of the party had stopped. They found a good fire and supper waiting for them on their return. They camped that night on the shores of Pile O' Bones creek.

Excitement ran high among the travellers that night. Supper over they all gathered around one big fire in the open. Each had his own particular plans for the future.

"So it's a homestead for you, Bob. I'm not cut out for a farmer. Think I'll sit tight till I see where the railway hits these parts." This was big Timothy, the man who had come to their aid when they were stuck in the creek.

"Good idea, Tim. We farmers will need store-keepers. As for me, it's the land that brings me here," Bob assured him.

And so they talked far into the night. They would need blacksmiths, barbers, hotelkeepers, bakers, butchers. Who should have a better right to this opportunity than the men who are here before the road?

Next morning the Currie family was up before the sun. Bob smiled happily at the little group seated on the grass in front of their tent eating oatmeal porridge.

"This is our big day. Today we choose our new home. Any instructions?" he asked, looking at mother.

Mother's eyes were deep pools this morning, as if in their depths something very important was hiding.

"Yes," she answered, "I want to find a spot where the land is a little rolling, not quite so flat as this so that it will slope away from the door. Some day we might have a lawn."

"What about trees?" asked her husband.

"I guess we'll have to be satisfied without trees. Maples grow quickly though. We could soon have a grove of maples. Don't you think we can find such a place?" she asked.

Bob laughed. "Sounds a little vague, but we can try. And you Mort?"

"Oh, I don't know. This land is so big there's no beginning and no end. I just hope we get good soil," answered the boy.

"You got something there, Mort. On these prairie-est essential that we have good soil and water. looked at Little Bear, who, sitting on the grass, been staring into space, taking no part in the conversation.

Now he got to his feet. "We go," he said and started for the horses.

When the men returned they found mother dressed in a suit of Bob's overalls. They all stared at her. She laughed.

"Did you think for one minute you were leaving me here while the gentlemen decided on the spot for our new home? Go and get the other pony, Mort. I'm going along."

"Yippee!" shouted Mort and he catapulted in the direction of the one lonely pony standing, head high, watching his companions being led away.

"Come on, Deck, you're going, too. This is to be a great day and you're not going to miss it."

They came back on the run.

When all was ready, Little Bear took the lead. They had to cross the creek again but Little Bear knew a sandy ridge where the ponies could travel single file and did not have to swim. Safely over, they headed east for some distance and then turned sharply to the right. Bob judged they must have travelled some five miles when Little Bear turned his horse again to the east and came to a halt.

The Indian boy, clad in his picturesque costume of deerskin, the morning sun glinting on his bronzed face, sat his buckskin pony very straight, raised his right arm and pointed to the east.

"There. Your new home," he said.

The others, too, had halted. To them the land looked much the same as what they had been travelling over, except that a ravine began at their feet and dipped away to the south. This ravine was full of water.

"It looks very good, Little Bear. But what's the difference between this and the land we've passed?" asked Bob.

"Water," grunted Little Bear.

"We passed the creek."

"Creeks dry up. You dig, find plenty water here. This good place."

Bob looked at his wife. She nodded. "I think Little Bear's right, Bob. This is exactly what I want. There's the spot for the house," she added pointing to a rise, where the ground sloped to the ravine.

Bob looked at Mort inquiringly. "Yes, Dad," said the boy. "This'll do."

They rounded the end of the ravine and rode onto the rise to the east. Here, Bob Currie dismounted and took a stake and a hatchet from his saddle bag. He drove the stake into the ground. Then straightening his back and raising his right hand he proclaimed:

"In the name of the Great White Queen, I declare this land to be the property of Robert I. Currie and Company."

Mort and his mother looked surprised and a little awed.

"How much land are you claiming?" Mrs. Currie wanted to know.

"As much as they'll give me," Bob answered. "Now what do you say if we go back, gather our traps and get home on our own land today?"

All agreed that it was a fine idea. "But can you find your way back?" asked mother.

"No, I'm sure Little Bear can, though."

They were all satisfied to trust Little Bear.

When the land was surveyed later, Mort discovered that they had squatted on the northwest quarter of section thirty-four, in township sixteen and range nineteen. The spot they had picked for their home was entirely on their own side of the line.

Although Little Bear had guided them unerringly to the spot where they had left their outfit, their troubles were not yet over, however. The creek, which had to be crossed again, was wide and deep. They could not take the outfit on the sandy ridge, where the ponies had travelled with such ease in the morning, but must risk the deep water again.

Mrs. Currie insisted on driving the ponies hitched to the buckboard. Swollen streams no longer held any terrors for her. When the ponies reached the middle of the stream and the buckboard began to float, she simply gathered her feet under her on the seat and rode triumphantly to shore.

The faithful oxen brought the load safely to the other side and slowly plodded up the bank. The boys, after removing their shoes and stockings and slinging them around their necks, swam their ponies across. Without further trouble our travellers reached the spot where Bob had driven the stake. They were home. The Curries felt that now they were a part of this great, new land. Little Bear accepted Mort's invitation to remain with them for a few days.



"I declare this land to be the property of Robert L. Currie
and Company."

CHAPTER V

THE FIRST FURROW

Camp was made that May day on what they hoped would be their own land. Daisy and the ponies were tethered but the oxen were allowed to roam at will. Later in the day Mr. Currie stood on a slight rise of ground and looked off into the distance. Mort joined him.

Putting his hand on the boy's shoulder he asked, "What do you think of it, Mort, this strange, lonely land?"

"I have a queer feeling, Dad. This land has been here since the world began--waiting."

"Waiting for what, son?"

"For us. It was made for us. We will turn those fields of prairie grass into fields of wheat. Wheat to feed people."

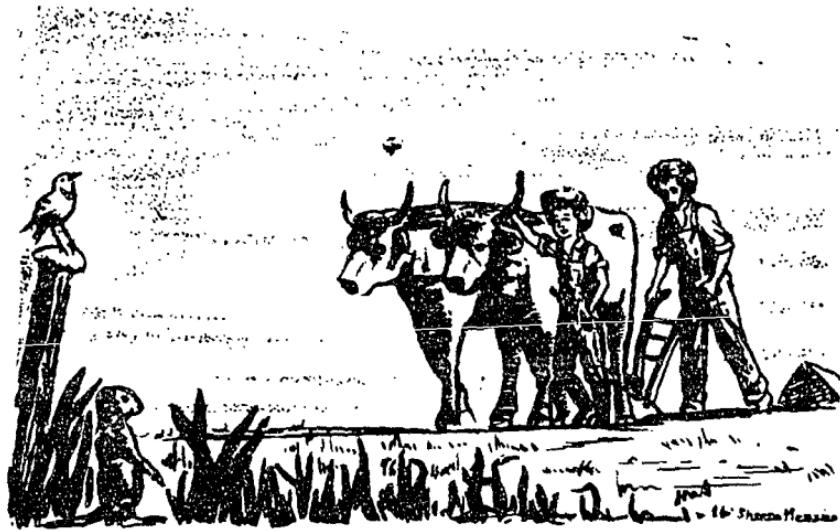
"We can plough the fields and scatter the good seed--and hope for rain," Bob added. "What say you we get the oxen and plough our first furrow?"

"Good!" shouted Mort and he dashed off to where Buck and Bright were peacefully chewing their cuds. "You poor critters," Mort chuckled. "How little you know what's in store for you."

Bob Currie stepped off what he judged to be almost half a mile in a straight line east from the tent. Here he drove a stake.

"Think you can head the oxen straight for that stake?" he asked Mort.

"I can try," answered the boy. As the coulter cut deep and the share turned the sod, Mort had a feeling of exaltation. He didn't feel weary as he plodded back and forth, his hand on the horn of the nigh ox. He loved the sound of the blade as it cut deep



Mort loved the sound of the blade as it cut deep into the grass roots.

into the grass roots. This was their land. They were the first to claim it. They were pioneers.

When they reached the tent the second time, mother came out with hot tea and cookies.

"You needn't think it's only the men who work around here," she said as she handed them fresh baked cookies.

"Gosh but these are good," said Mort, with his mouth full. "I had almost forgotten how good your cookies could be." He grinned at his mother.

"My men will be well fed from now on." She smiled at them both.

Their first night on the prairie was a lonely one. They were at home and settled for the night but they were not to sleep. The most blood curdling howls would come from one side of the tent and then in a matter of seconds answering howls from the opposite side.

"Whatever is that?" whispered Mrs. Currie.

"Sounds as if we were surrounded by coyotes," answered Bob. "The only weapon I have is that short handled axe. Hope I'm a good marksman."

"They're long way off," grunted Little Bear. "They'll not come near camp."

Mort hoped Little Bear was right; he also hoped Little Bear could not know how the shivers chased each other over his body.

Morning dawned unbelievably beautiful as prairie mornings can be. Unable to sleep, Mort rose before the sun and crawled under the side of the tent. Little Bear was already about. The two boys stood on a hillock, as Bob Currie had stood the afternoon before, and gazed into the future. Nothing broke their vision until it came to rest on the far horizon. Theirs was the only home in sight. Mort spoke, his eyes still on that far horizon, "Isn't it strange the different feeling you have in the morning? Night closes you in. You feel pressed down. In the morning you feel as if you had wings. Anything can happen."

Little Bear nodded. "White man have to be brave to live on prairie."

Mort frowned and looked at Little Bear. "You said that before, back on the trail. What makes you say it? Do you think white men aren't brave?"

"White men won't learn from Indians. Think they know better." He raised his head and looked full at Mort.

Mort returned his gaze. Then, "You promised to help me, Little Bear. Do you remember?"

"Only you can make yourself brave. When you need me I will know. I will come, no matter how far," replied Little Bear.

Mort's warm smile lit his face. The two boys shook hands like grown men and reaffirmed their friendship. At that moment a meadow lark called to them, clear and sweet. Mort turned again to the east,

guided in his direction by the faint flush in the sky. A new day was being born. The wind sighed through the brown of last year's grass, where already the green of a new crop was pushing its way through the tangle of roots. Mort looked toward their own camp. The patient oxen lay near the tent where his father and mother still slept. The hobbled horses were making a good breakfast of the old brown prairie grass flavored with fresh green shoots. At some distance from them, Daisy was tethered to a stake driven into the ground. Mort smiled as he thought how much at home the animals appeared. This was all part of the new life they were beginning together.

For centuries the rains had been falling in summer, the snows covering the plains in winter; the land had been waiting. Mort stood very still, his eyes taking on a dreamy, faraway look. He was hearing strange sounds, the creaking of wagons, the champing of bits, the tramping of many feet. "They're coming," he whispered. "They're coming, people, neighbors. We won't be lonely long." A town sprang to life. Great buildings of brick and stone and mortar rose before his eyes. This was the call of the prairie. The boy understood.

He turned and smiled at his new friend. "This will one day be the White man's land, too. You'll share it with us."

Little Bear grunted.

Sounds of life were now coming from the tent. The boys soon heard the welcome call to breakfast. This first morning on the homestead they had oatmeal porridge, fried salt pork and hot biscuits. Mrs. Currie, whose delight was in seeing her family well fed and happy, was glad to be settled sufficiently to enable her to provide proper meals.

"Well boys, what are your plans for today?" asked Bob Currie, rising from the packing box on which he had been sitting.

"Today we get poles for house, if you please," answered Little Bear.

"That would please me very much. Where would you get them?"

"Know spot not far from here. Could we take ponies? We will not make load heavy."

"Fine. That'll leave the oxen for me. How can I plough with no boy to lead the oxen, though?" he smiled at Mort.

"You've a very good guide right here," spoke up Mrs. Currie. "This is a company affair. There are no drones in our hive. My housework won't take much of my time."

They all smiled at her. "I'm afraid you'll find it very tiring, tramping back and forth with the oxen," answered her husband.

"Nonsense, after what I've been through? It's time we were moving. See that sun," and she started to hustle about, clearing away the breakfast things.

"You can't stay out in the woods without a shotgun," warned Bob as he helped the boys harness and hitch the ponies to the wagon. "Coyotes you know. Steal your grub."

"Will pass camp of my people and get gun," replied Little Bear.

The boys took blankets, bread and cold meat and started off across the open prairie. All the low places and ravines were still filled with melting snows. Mort was amazed at the confidence with which Little Bear struck out across that uncharted prairie. He hoped the Indian boy knew where he was going and would be able to find his way back. They had to ford the creek again and found a crossing, where the water was not too deep and they were able to see bottom. Reaching a small wood, they went to work with a will. They marked trees that were tall and straight and would make good supports. When night caught up with them

they had felled a goodly number of straight, green poplars.

That night they slept under the wagon in the lee of the wood pile. Again Mort was thrilled, as he had been on the trail, at the immensity of sky over him. There was no beginning and no end. Sometime during the night he was awakened with an uneasy feeling. The ponies were nervous. Little Bear was sitting up and Mort could see he had something in his hand. The next moment the night quiet was shattered by a shot. Mort crawled from under the wagon and lay on his stomach peering into the night.

What Mort saw, as his eyes strained into the darkness, was several long mangy creatures, disappearing with amazing speed. "What . . ." he got no further.

"Coyotes," muttered Little Bear. "Got our food box."

The two boys crept about cautiously to find what was left of their lunch scattered to the four winds. It looked as if tomorrow would be a meatless day. They crept back to their berth and finally fell asleep. When Mort awakened again, Little Bear was gone. He could hear the ponies munching near by. It was a dreary awakening. He didn't relish the idea of starting to work without breakfast. Perhaps this was the beginning of life in a hard country.

Suddenly he sat up and sniffed. He could smell something cooking. Like a flash he was out from under that wagon. There sat Little Bear in front of a fire holding something on a stick. Mort ran. "What have you there?" he shouted.

"You see. Chicken. Prairie Chicken for breakfast," Little Bear grunted.

"But I didn't hear a shot."

"Didn't shoot him, caught him with snare," answered the Indian.

Mort crouched by the fire waiting. Now he could eat. How grateful he was to Little Bear.

While the chicken cooked, Mort strolled over to what he thought was the coyote Little Bear had shot during the night. He picked it up in one hand and stood looking at it, his eyes growing wide in astonishment. "What! When did you do this?" he asked.

The Indian boy grunted, "While you sleep."

Mort examined the skin. It had been carefully scraped clean. Not a particle of flesh or grease remained. He looked across at his friend.

Little Bear made a tripod from which to hang the chicken. Then he joined Mort.

"Now we will stretch skin. Get some sticks, make pegs."

The boys made, what Mort considered, far too many pegs for one small skin. They found a level patch of ground and pegged the skin tight with the skin side next the earth. "We will leave it there until we go home. Then we will peg it down again and leave it until skin is dry. Will make good mat for new house."

"But this skin is your's. You shot the coyote."

"Animals belong to all. Nobody own animals. You need this skin. Skin yours."

As the sun climbed higher Little Bear pointed off in the distance. "See."

Try as he would, Mort could see nothing. "I don't see anything but prairie."

"If you live in this country, you must learn to use your eyes," remarked the other shortly.

"I do use my eyes but I can't see a thing." Mort was leaning forward in his effort to see. Then a smile broke over his face. He saw a moving speck. As he watched he could see the speck was coming closer. He leaned on the axe handle waiting and watching. The

Indian boy continued to lop the branches from the trees they had felled. "Friend," he grunted without looking up.

Mort gave him a puzzled glance. "How do you know?" he asked.

"You will see."

Mort could now see someone on horseback. The rider was coming straight to them at a good pace. Finally Mort recognized Wi-ya-ka, his own pony, and sent up a whoop.

In a short time Bob brought Wi-ya-ka to a halt beside the boys.

"You fellows are doing a good job here."

"You do good job, too. You learn quick," said Little Bear.

Bob grinned as he dismounted. "Not so good when this is the only poplar grove in miles. I decided you men might need a little help...and nourishment."

The boys looked at each other and Mort laughed. "We sure need the nourishment. We had callers last night."

"Coyotes?" asked his father. When Mort nodded, he asked, "Did they leave you anything for breakfast?"

Then Mort told the story of the prairie chicken and also pointed to the skin drying in the sun.

When the sun was high in the sky Bob Currie built a fire and boiled water from a near-by slough for tea. They ate their sandwiches and rested. While Bob smoked, Little Bear told them stories of the country, and his people. The Indians had looked upon the white man as the great White Manito. They were disappointed when they found that the white man was not all wise. "He starved in country where Indian can live," Little Bear finished.

Mort grinned, "Like me this morning."

"I see no reason why White and Red cannot live in this country, as friends, like you and Mort. There is room enough for all," replied Bob.

Little Bear grunted, "All are not like you. To Indian, man must be brave. He must stand pain; he must live by head and hands."

"Well, we'd better use our hands right now to get these poles loaded and get back home while there's still daylight," remarked Bob, rising.

That night the good food Mrs. Currie provided disappeared like magic. She was more than pleased with her fur mat and helped the boys peg it down.

Soon after supper Little Bear left, riding off to join his own people. It was with a heavy heart that Mort stood by Little Bear's buckskin pony, waiting to say good-bye.

"If Manito thinks, we will meet again," said Little Bear, looking down at his friend.

Mort was speechless and stood for a long time motionless watching the Indian boy ride into the dusk. "If Manito thinks, we will meet again," he muttered aloud.



"If Manito thinks, we will meet again."

CHAPTER VI

THE SOD HOUSE

Next morning work on the new house began in earnest. Mother had very decided ideas about her new home. It was to have a front door, facing west, so that she might watch the prairie sunsets. In the years to come, from the back door, they would look out on their fields of waving grain and pasture land. She wanted it built on the high land, east of the ravine, in case of floods, and she added, "You can see farther."

Mort and his father exchanged grins. "My eyes hurt now from looking and seeing nothing," Mort remarked.

"That won't last long," his mother retorted. "We'll have neighbors."

They all decided that mother had chosen the best location. Their land was almost as level as a table, except where the ravine cut across the northwest corner. The bank of this ravine stretched out in a level plateau towards the east but to the west it sloped gradually to a depth of five to six feet. Mother could vision a lawn on that slope, with honeysuckle hedges and lilacs bordering it. At present the ravine was almost full of water, which provided the supply for house and stock.

"Since nature provides the bricks and poles for our new home, and we supply the labor, I see no reason why the house should not be a fair size," Bob remarked.

"Sure thing, Dad. This will be our castle. Let's make it a good one."

So they measured a twenty foot square well back from the slope, where the land was level. The square was scraped clean and any roughness levelled off. Then straight, peeled poles were driven into the ground

at the corners. The sods, too, had to be special. For these they ploughed near the ravine where the ground was moist and Bob felt the sods would be damp enough to hold together but not damp enough to be sticky. Mort thought that for this once they should be glad the oxen moved slowly. The sods were not so likely to break. The ploughshare cut deep and the thick roots held the earth in place.

They built the walls straight and true, a little better than eight feet high and about ten inches thick. As the work progressed, Mort frequently stepped back and cast a critical eye over the walls to be sure they were keeping them vertical. The front wall was built high and the sides sloped towards the back. Across the centre of the house four stout poles, spaced at five feet, were driven into the ground. A beam was nailed on these to support the weight of the roof. Mort declared this divided their home into kitchen and parlor-bedroom.

Mort and Bob knew no time limits but daylight. They slept through the hours of darkness, as only those could sleep who were exhausted by physical labor in the open air, then rose with the sun and began all over again.

It was slow work. Mother became uneasy. One morning at breakfast she handed them an ultimatum. "Gentlemen, for the last time, I'm asking you to plough my garden—today."

"Now, Mother, be reasonable, we have to get the roof on our house before it rains. It would be too bad if we were to get a heavy rain with the roof half on," returned Bob.

"All right, I'll take the oxen and plough my own garden," she retorted.

Mort went into peals of laughter at the thought of his mother trying to hold the hand plough and drive the oxen. "Good, Mom, I'll hitch the oxen for you."

"That may be funny, but remember, not another meal do I cook until my garden is ploughed, and that's final."

"Good luck with the ploughing, Maggie," said Bob grinning at his wife as he left the breakfast table.

Outside he turned to Mort, "Well, Son, I guess we'd better knock off and plough mother's garden. Men can't work without food you know. I have an idea Mother means that threat."

When the ploughing was finished, to Mort's chagrin, he had to spend much precious time breaking up the sod and preparing the land. Then mother came along with her seeds, brought all the way from her own garden in Ontario. She had lettuce, radishes, carrots, turnips, cabbage, tomatoes and even pumpkins and sunflowers. "We'll grow our own chicken feed," she announced.

"But where are the chickens?" asked Mort.

"We'll get them," was her confident reply.

After this interruption, work on the house continued. The walls were up and Mort and his father were busy at the roof. The sods for the roof had to be selected with great care. One day in early afternoon, Mort had driven the wagon, piled high with sods, close to the south wall. He was carefully choosing the best ones and passing them up to Bob who, with the skill of a master bricklayer, was pressing them firmly in place grass side down, when Mort noticed a rider galloping towards them.

He soon recognized the rider as Little Bear. The Indian boy stopped beside the wagon. "Good," he said pointing towards the house.

"You like it?" asked Bob.

The boy nodded. "I bring good news."

"What news?"

"White settler come, baby sick. Him go back," replied Little Bear.

"Did you say good news! How can that be good news?" asked Bob, puzzled.

"Bring everything for house. Not take it back. Sell."

Mort's eyes danced. "Windows and doors and hinges?" he asked.

Little Bear nodded, still watching Mr. Currie.

"Where is this man?" asked Bob. "We should try to help him."

"At Ota-sa-wa-pa-win—Look out. Not far."

"Mort, go and hitch the ponies to the wagon. I'll call Mother. She'll be able to do something for the sick child?"

Mort beckoned Little Bear to follow him.

When the boys returned, with the ponies and wagon, Mrs. Currie was standing ready. She was wearing a long print dress and sunbonnet to match and was carrying a small black bag, in which she kept her home nursing supplies.

Mort sat on the ground hugging his knees as the others drove away with Little Bear in the lead. What was he to do? He knew his father would not want him to continue on the roof. Suddenly he remembered that his mother wanted a hole dug where she could keep the milk and butter. He would surprise her.

He went down near the ravine where the soil was moist and started to dig. The time passed quickly. Suddenly he realized that the sun had almost disappeared. He dropped his tools and went for Daisy.

It was dusk when his father and mother returned, smiling and well pleased with their afternoon's work. They brought the mother and baby home with them. Mrs. Currie was sure that with rest and proper food the little one would soon be well.

Mr. Currie had been able to buy lumber for doors and frames, windows with real glass in them, a few nails and hinges. Mother had been able to get her precious bag of lime.

"Well, Mort," said Bob that night as he pushed back from the supper table and reached for his pipe, "I guess Tim's hunch was right."

"What hunch, Dad?"

"You remember the night we all camped by the creek?"

Mort nodded.

"Tim was all for opening a store somewhere along the new railway. He was just going to wait until he could be sure where the line was going. It looks now as if the road would hit the very spot where we camped that night."

Mort was leaning forward and breathing hard. "How long, Dad, how long?" he asked.

"Not so long. Little Bear tells me the company has an enormous outfit and they're really travelling. He says, 'Nothing today, railway tomorrow'." Bob laughed as he tried to imitate Little Bear.

"Tim has the right idea," Bob continued after a few puffs on his old pipe. "We were too far east today to see what has happened at the camp on Pile O' Bones Creek since we left, but Little Bear says that Tim has a store in operation. He met a half-breed freight brigade the other day and bought the whole load, set up a tent, and now has a retail business started." He smiled at his wife. "So now, Maggie, when you run out of supplies you know where you can get them."

"I wonder what he'll have," Mrs. Currie mused.

Bob shrugged. "I wouldn't know. I wasn't there, as you know. I imagine he'll have foodstuffs, hardware, things the settlers will need; otherwise he wouldn't have bought them."

Mort sat with his elbows on the table, his chin cupped in his hands and stared at his father. His dream was coming true. There would be a town—and soon. That night he moved in his dream as he went about his chores.

The next day Bob and Mort were back at the house with renewed energy. There was so much to be done before the cold weather came. When the roof was covered with sods the outside was plastered with a thick coating of mud, which, when thoroughly dry, made the roof fairly waterproof. Mother insisted that the inside of the house be plastered with mud also. Then she could give it several coats of whitewash (lime mixed with water).

Work on the house progressed rapidly now. Mort soon became an expert plasterer. While Bob made frames for the windows and doors and fitted them carefully against next winter's wind and snow, Mort saw to it that inside, the walls were made smooth for mother's whitewash.

After a few days of Mrs. Currie's careful nursing, the woman and child she had taken into their home were well enough to return to their own camp. No amount of persuasion could change the woman's determination to return to her old home in the east. The Curries were saddened to see them leave.

Before they moved into their prairie home the walls and ceiling were given several coats of whitewash.

There were shelves, with bright colored curtains for cupboards. Curtains also hung at the windows. Bunks built of poplar poles, with cotton ticks piled high with prairie grass, served as beds at night and seats in the daytime. Bright Hudson's Bay blankets added a touch of color. And, of course, Little Bear's fur rug was on the floor between the two beds. Their furniture was made mostly from packing boxes. The table was a low flat box with poplar poles for legs. They had an apple barrel rocker for which Mother made brightly colored cushions.

The Curries were justly proud of what they had accomplished. They now had a cosy comfortable home but they did not relax their efforts.

One day, while Mort was hoeing the potatoes, he looked up and saw a rider approaching. He continued watching until he recognized the rider.

"Little Bear," he shouted. "Oh, if Manito thinks!" Down went the hoe and Mort catapulted across the intervening space to meet his friend. "Little Bear, it's good to see you. It's so long since you left. Where have you been?"

"It has not been long but you have done much work. That is good," said his friend pointing to the cabin.

"Come and see." Little Bear left his pony free, knowing that he would not wander away, and he followed Mort to the new house.

As usual the Indian boy came bearing gifts. This time he brought rush mats which his mother had made from willow withes that grew along the creek. She had dyed the reeds bright colors—red, yellow and gold. They made a pleasant splash of light on the dark mud of the floor.

Little Bear was all admiration for their home. "You have the best home on the prairie," he announced. "You will live and grow strong in this land."

Mort tried to keep Little Bear for the night but his friend insisted that he must return to camp. His people were on the move. They would spend the summer near Long Lake where there were many berries—gooseberries, black currants, saskatoons and choke cherries.

"You come berry picking later, Mort?" asked Little Bear.

"We shall see," answered Mrs. Currie. "It is hard for us to spare Mort, even for a short time."

Again Mort stood for a long time watching his friend disappearing in the distance. What kind of a life was Little Bear's when he lived with his own people? Slowly with dragging steps he returned to hoeing potatoes.

One afternoon shortly after Little Bear's visit, Mort returned to the house for a drink and found his mother painting. She had velvet stretched on a wooden frame and was painting a bunch of beautiful prairie roses. The pink petals stood out from the black velvet in all their soft beauty. Some of the delicate petals had dropped from their stems to rest on the wooden board, which served as a table.

"Mother, they're beautiful!" exclaimed Mort. "I didn't know you had your oil paints with you."

"It was to have been a surprise. Don't tell your father. I was afraid the roses would be past their best if I didn't do them soon."

Mort stepped back to admire the picture. "It's lovely, Mom. You can be proud of it."

"The prairie is very generous with its wild flowers," remarked his mother. "The air is always sweet." She breathed deeply as a light breeze stirred the perfume of many wild flowers.

"Yes, Mom, the air always smells sweet. There's nothing here to spoil it," said Mort.

"Remember, not a word about the picture," warned his mother as Mort started back to the field.

The next few days Mort seemed to have some mysterious mission. He was never to be found after supper. Then one night the mystery was solved. He produced a frame, eighteen inches square, for the bouquet of roses. He had used unpeeled poplar branches about the size of a man's thumb. They were delicately carved and fitted at the corners. From their wooden frame, against the whitewashed sods, the roses smiled at them.

CHAPTER VII

NEIGHBORS

May had slipped into June, June into July and still the Curries worked from daylight to dark. They fought mosquitoes, heat, drought - 1882 proved to be a dry summer following the heavy snowfall of the previous winter and spring floods. Still their faith extended beyond the present, to the time when this rich land would yield its golden heritage to those with courage to endure. By the first of July they had forty acres broken and seeded with oats. The day by day living was pleasant enough. There was always the reaching out for further achievement. It might have been a lonely life if there had been any time for loneliness. Mort sometimes looked with longing at that spot beyond their line. It would be good to look across that line and see people moving about, doing the same things that they, the Curries, were doing.

Then one day it happened. Mort had been hoeing mother's garden. The mosquitoes were in clouds above his head. Their continuous hum kept time with his hoe. He was thankful for the netting that cascaded from his old straw hat. Straightening to ease the ache in his back his eyes caught sight of moving objects in the distance. He peered, leaning forward, a habit of his, as if to bring his eyes in closer range with what he was trying to see. "Yes, yes, there's no doubt about it, they're coming," he gasped. Dropping the hoe he dashed for the house, letting out one mighty whoop.

"Mother, Mother," he shouted. "They're coming! They're coming!"

"What do you mean Mort? Who's coming? Indians?" She looked at Mort. She smiled at his eagerness, then looked out of the window and saw the cause of Mort's excitement.

"Don't be too hopeful, Mort. They may not be coming here."

Mort and his mother went outside to watch the slow progress of the caravan as it twisted and squeaked over the rutted prairie trail that led from the sod house to the town.

Mort laughed. "I didn't know we had made such a crooked path," he said.

Mrs. Currie, her sunbonnet shielding her face, and Mort, his hair sticking up through the old straw hat, watched and waited unmindful of heat and mosquitoes.

A man on horseback broke away from the outfit and rode towards them.

"Good day, Mam, would you be Mrs. Currie?" he asked.

"I would," she smiled, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "This is my son, Mort. My husband has not yet returned from town."

"I understand you have the north west quarter of thirty-four."

"That's right. Is there a chance that you might settle near us?" Mrs. Currie's voice showed the eagerness she felt.

"The quarter to the north. The name is Mason; my wife and youngsters are with the outfit."

There was more than sun lending color to Mort's face at that moment.

"Oh, good!" he gasped speaking for the first time. "Boys, about my age?"

The stranger glanced at him. "Sorry, son, only a girl of eleven and a baby, six months. Jane makes a pretty good tom-boy, though. Can ride like an Indian."

A cloud darkened Mort's eyes for a moment. Some of his eagerness was restored however, as a small rider drew rein beside them. She was a sturdy little girl of eleven. Her auburn curls were held in place by a cotton cap which had once been white. Her blue denim

overalls were faded and patched. There was a generous sprinkling of bran on her nose, which twitched like a rabbit's when she smiled.

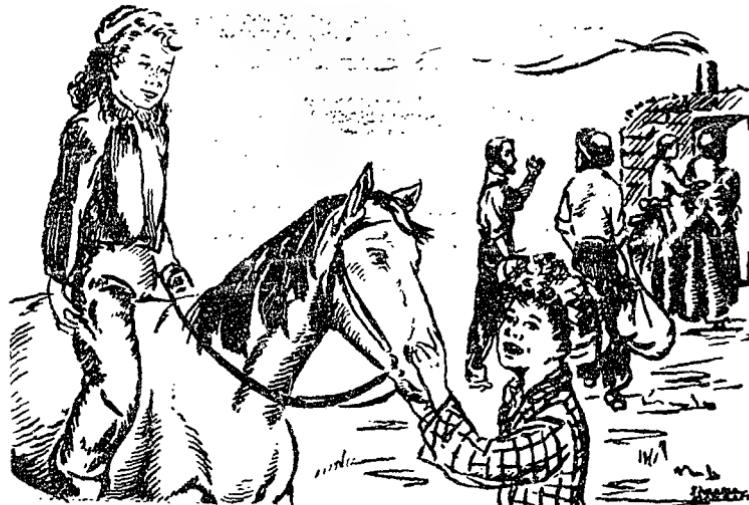
"Jane, this is Mrs. Currie, and Mort," smiled her father. "We're to be their next door neighbors."

"I'm glad you'll be here before the winter sets in. And now do come in and let me make you tea," invited Mrs. Currie warmly.

"Thank you very much. I'm sure my wife will be overjoyed to have a place to rest while we make camp." Mr. Mason dismounted as the wagons came to a halt.

Mrs. Mason was a fragile little person, as fair as Maggie Currie was dark. Her husband helped her from the wagon and she came forward with a pleasant smile. However, she stopped abruptly when she saw the inside of the Currie home. This sod shack, miles from any human habitation, showed signs of comfort and culture.

"Oh, Sam," she exclaimed, turning to her husband, "will our house be as nice as this one?"



As girls go, she wasn't too bad. She'd be company.

"That depends upon you, my dear. If you're as good a housekeeper as Mrs. Currie is, our house will be just as nice. Sods are the same anywhere," he answered.

On the table, covered by a white cloth, were piled loaves of crusty brown bread and the sweet smell still hovered in the shack.

As Mort went to the dugout for butter his mind was filled with the thought of having a new friend. It would have been so much better if the friend had been a boy; still, as girls go, she wasn't too bad. That night Mrs. Mason, Jane and the baby slept in the house with Mrs. Currie, while Mort and his father spent the night back in the old tent.

The weeks that followed were busy ones. Bob Currie and Mort gave all the assistance they could to their new neighbors. Soon the new homestead began to take on the appearance of a place where people lived. Mort and Jane went riding on any pretext. Mort soon discovered that Jane was more at home in the saddle than he was and that she rode a spirited horse. It irked him to see how horse and rider could clear the creek at a single bound. He determined that he had to do some practising, when she wasn't around. But how was this to be done? She seemed to be everywhere. Girls could get in the way.

Before they were aware of it August was almost gone. The sun still rode high in a clear blue sky, but the days were getting shorter and the nights colder. The Curries were not ready for the long cold days ahead. The sod barn had to be built. Mr. Currie had succeeded in buying a couple of head of cattle, a few chickens and two pigs. These, along with the oxen and ponies, would have to be properly housed for winter. Mort had picked up a mongrel dog, part collie, from one of the men camped by the creek and mother had named him Skip. Skip was never far from Mort's heels and the boy took great pains in teaching him to

be a good watch dog. He soon learned to bring the cattle home for milking and to keep the hawks from the chickens. The dog's one regret, when he watched Mort ride off to town, was that he must remain at home to guard the place.

By the middle of August they were using their own vegetables from mother's garden. The tall sunflowers made a shining spot of gold in the otherwise colorless field.

One day Mort and Jane coaxed to be allowed to ride to Tim's store for supplies. They came home late that evening in great excitement. There was to be a celebration the next day. A town was to be christened.

As they drew up in the Currie yard, Mort saw his mother going to the house with a pail of milk, and Skip came bounding out to meet them. As Mort swung to the ground in front of his mother, the dog sprang at him placing his forepaws on the boy's shoulders.

"Oh, Mom, we've the most wonderful news. Down, Skip, down."

"What is it, dear? What's all the excitement?" She placed her free hand on the boy's arm.

"It's the town, Mom, our town. It's to be christened tomorrow."

"And, Mrs. Currie, you should see the millions of people and animals and... everything," Jane stopped for a breath.

"Millions!" Mort mimicked scornfully.

"Well, there are, too. At least it looked like millions."

"Children, put your ponies away while I take this milk to the house and we'll hear all about it."

In the matter of minutes, Mort came bursting into the kitchen, Skip at his heels.

"Where's Dad, Mom?"

His mother was smiling and looking over his head. Mort turned. Bob was hanging his coat on the wooden peg behind the door.

"So you have news, son."

Mort noted the twinkle in his father's eyes. "Have you heard?" he asked.

Bob shook his head. "No, I've heard nothing. Not a word."

Mother and father seated themselves at the board table and waited for Mort's story to begin. Mort, far too excited to sit down, stood shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

"It's the railway, Mom. It has passed Tim's store." He looked from one to the other to see if his parents were appreciating this remarkable piece of news.

"Is that right?" asked his mother, her voice little more than a whisper. When she looked up at her husband there were tears in her eyes. "Think of it, Bob, the railway at last!"

He smiled at her. "It really hasn't been long, Maggie. We've only been here since the last of May, remember?"

"I think I've been just a little afraid out here on this great lonely prairie with no railway. We couldn't get away if we wanted to."

"Why should we want to get away? Anyway that's all over now. Tell us about it, Mort. What did you find out today?"

"Jane's right about there being a lot of people. I had a long talk with one of the foremen. He says there are five thousand men and seventeen hundred teams of horses and mules. They have ploughs, scrapers and wagons—hundreds of them. They seem to have brought all their supplies, everything they need, with them."

"That's a good thing. They'd have found nothing here to feed that army," his mother remarked.

"We saw the big tent where they cook and serve meals to the men who do the grading. The men start work at seven in the morning and work until six o'clock except for an hour off at noon."

Mort started to laugh and slapped the table with his open palm as he sidled onto the old apple box chair. "I saw and heard the funniest thing today. Just a few minutes before quitting time, six o'clock, one of the mules started to bray; all the others joined in and kept this up until they were unhitched. You never heard such a noise. The men had to unhitch them in self defence." Mort went into peals of laughter.

Both Bob and Mrs. Currie laughed. "Wise old mule," said Bob. "He's formed a society for protection of labor. It seems incredible," Bob continued, "that the company should have built all those miles of road in such a short time."

"Maybe the mules needed to protect themselves," his wife broke in.

Bob shook his head as he filled the old black pipe. "I realize now why the route was changed."

"Why, Dad?"

"This route is much shorter than the northern one would have been. I understand from eastern papers that British Columbia is becoming impatient and putting pressure on the company to get the road through. This will be almost a direct line from Winnipeg. It must take a tremendous amount of money to handle a job like that," he mused.

"It certainly must. If you ever saw that outfit! The men work in gangs," Mort continued. "One gang goes ahead and grades the road bed, another places the ties and last of all comes the gang that lays the rails. This gang sleeps and eats in two-storey cars that follow along on the tracks. When they come to the end of the rails that are laid, the engine stops. When two more rails are in place and bolted down the engine pushes the cars forward again. This engine doesn't pull the train, it pushes it."

"You've certainly had some excitement today, but what did you have to eat?" asked his mother.

"The foreman gave us some bannock and bacon. I guess some bread and milk wouldn't be bad," Mort admitted.

When his mother went to get the bread and milk Mort turned to his father. "You know, Dad, the floods on the Red River this spring washed out some of the tracks or they'd have been here sooner. You should see the ground near that camp. There's certainly no prairie grass to cut there; eaten off as clean as that table. It takes a lot of grass to feed all those animals. Men take turns in herding them at night."

There was quiet in the little house for some time as Mort concentrated on his bread and milk, Bob smoked and mother knitted. Suddenly Mort looked up.

"Oh, Dad, we'll just have to be there. Think what it will mean when the town becomes a great city, to be able to say we were there when it was christened," cried Mort, his voice pitched in high G.

"But it means a whole day, Mort, for all of us. The summer is almost gone."

"Oh, gosh," muttered Mort. "There'll still be lots of time to work."

"Mort's right, Bob, we should go. This is an historic occasion and we may regret it all our lives if we're not there. Besides, we've all earned a holiday," added Mrs. Currie.

"Well," began Mr. Currie slowly, Mort noticed the twinkle in his father's eyes and knew all would be well. He was just in the act of shouting when a shadow fell across the floor and in bounded Jane.

"Mr. Currie, Mr. Currie," she sputtered trying to get her breath. "Daddy says he'll go if you will. Please say you will. You will, won't you?"

"Just a minute, young lady, go where? I like to know where I'm going before I promise."

"To town, tomorrow. Hasn't Mort told you?" Then looking at the smiling faces she added, "Of course he has."

"Do you think we should go?" asked Mr. Currie.

"Oh, yes, it'll be fun. Mother says we'll take a lunch and have a real picnic."

"We'll think about it. I'll talk to your father."

Jane crinkled her face and her nose twitched at Mort behind Mr. Currie's back as she sidled out of the cabin.

"See you in the morning," she shouted as she disappeared.

CHAPTER VIII

REGINA CHRISTENED

The morning of August 23, 1882, dawned bright and beautiful as Jane had prayed it would. She felt her prayers had been answered. The sun rode an absolutely cloudless sky and there was a soft north-west wind blowing.

Our homesteaders were up before the sun. The cows had to be milked and tethered; pigs and chickens fed and mother's eggs packed. She had a few dozen to sell. What might be considered a good day's work was accomplished before the party started off on their five-mile drive to town and the celebration. The children had warned their parents they must be in the tent town before nine o'clock as that was the time set for the celebration to begin.

This was the day the new town was to be christened. The Canadian Pacific Railway had reached the banks of the Wascana (Pile O' Bones). The earliest settlers, believing that the railway would follow the old trail, had taken up land in the northern part of the country, and Battleford was made the Capital of the North-West Territories. When at the last minute the plans of the company were changed, and instead of following the old trail the road was built across the southern part of the country, there were many disappointed people—but our friends were not among them. (March 27th, 1883, an Order-in-Council declared the Town of Regina to be the seat of government of the North-West Territories.)

It was agreed that Mr. and Mrs. Mason and little Carol would ride in the buckboard with Mort's mother and dad, while Jane and Mort were to ride ahead on their ponies. As the oxen did the heavy work, the ponies, having little to do but grow fat on the succulent

prairie grass, had lost none of their high spirits, and were impatient to be off. Their small feet danced along the prairie trail.

Mort was sure his mother was the prettiest woman in the world. It had been so long since he had seen her dressed in her best that he had almost forgotten how pretty she was. The long, flowing skirt with tight fitting bodice was of a soft grey material. Her hat was poke bonnet style faced with pink. She carried a small pink parasol "to protect her from the sun" - she said.

It was quite different with Mort. He insisted on wearing the faded blue overalls and old straw hat even though his hair was sticking up through the crown. When they were ready to leave he was having great difficulty in persuading Skip to stay home and guard the stock while the family was away.

Finally, the children struck off ahead reaching town some time before their elders. President Van Horne's special car was standing on the tracks. The guests were arriving and taking their places in the car. Mort didn't know any of them but later he was to learn that they were Lieutenant-Governor and Mrs. Dewdney, Mr. McIntyre, Vice-President of the Railway Company; Van Horne, general manager of the company; Judge Johnstone and other settlers of note in the town, who had arrived during the last few months when it was known where the railway was to be built. What had been but a few scattered tents was beginning to grow into a fair sized tent town.

There were twenty-five or thirty guests present. Judge Johnstone proposed a toast and asked all present to drink "To the success of Regina, Queen City of the Plains." And so, on that August day, among a handful of notables surrounded by a few canvas tents, Regina was born.

Mort looked at his mother. "Queen City of the Plains," he muttered. "Where did they get that name?"

"She was named by a fair princess," his mother answered. "Princess Louise, wife of the Marquis of Lorne, present Governor-General of Canada, named our town Regina, which means Queen." His mother's eyes were almost as bright as Mort's and her voice as eager.

"Princess Louise?" queried Mort.

"Is a daughter of Queen Victoria," answered his mother, "and wife of our Governor-General, The Marquis of Lorne."

"Oh," said Mort, "Great White Queen to the Indians."

"That's right."

"Queen City," mused the boy. Then his face lighted. "I know she'll be queen of wheat—that's it, queen of wheat, Jane. We'll have wheat for prairie wool on these plains."

"Humph," Jane grunted. "Queen of Wheat! Who ever heard tell of a Queen of Wheat."

Mort gave her a withering look. How could you expect a girl to understand, he thought, and gave up.

Mort walked over to the tracks. He looked away to the east, where these ribbons of steel appeared to come from a point. As they approached him they spread their arms to take in the larger area. He turned to the west, where the prairie was still untouched by marks of civilization and he thought, "Soon big black engines will be belching smoke over these plains where engine smoke was never known. The buffalo are gone, the Indian's way of life will go, but the white man will come and make these plains his own." Again, he saw cities of stone and brick, mushrooming on the prairie. As he gazed, his mind could see those ribbons of steel springing from the grass westward, reaching the horizon.

"Hi, Mort, are you asleep? You've been standing there for ages as if turned to stone. Come on, let's do something," cried Jane impatiently.

"Ages, nothing!" returned Mort coming back to the present. "Jane, won't it be wonderful when the trains go through here every day? They'll bring all kinds of things from the east. And people will come."

"Oh, I dunno, we're all right as we are, aren't we?" answered Jane indifferently. "Let's do something."

At that moment Mort's body stiffened. He leaned forward peering hard. Yes, he was right. That was John Stuart. "Hi, Johnny," Mort shouted.

The straight back did not move nor the lids flutter.

No sign of recognition crossed the features of the Mountie. The red crept into Mort's face dying it a deep scarlet.

Bob Currie glanced at his son and then across at the Mountie and smiled.

"Mort," he said speaking softly. "Johnny's on duty. He can't speak to you now. Wait until this show is over."

Mort shot his Dad a grateful glance.

As soon as he was relieved Johnny came striding across to his friends. He shook hands all round but his special greeting was for Mort.

"Sorry, lad, to keep you waiting. When you become a Mountie you'll learn the rules. Still think you want to join the force?"

"Oh, yes, sir, I know I do." Mort's voice was eager.

"We'll be waiting for you," smiled Johnny as he moved away. "Keep hoping and growing," he added.

Mort's glance followed the tall straight figure in the bright uniform and the jangling spurs.

Jane brought him back to his immediate surroundings by tugging at his sleeve. "Come on, let's do something. I'm hungry," she said.

"You would be. You have a chance to see the Mounties, see Regina christened, and all you think of is something to eat," growled Mort.

Mother smiled at them. "It's a long time since we had our breakfast. I'm hungry, too, Jane. Bob, get our lunch baskets and find a place where we can build a fire and boil water for tea."

They found a good place down by the creek. Mort and his dad soon had the old black kettle slung over a bright fire. They had remembered to bring wood from home. The women opened the baskets and in no time they were all making merry over salt pork and egg sandwiches.

This was their one day in town so they must make the most of it. The grown-ups had errands to attend to but the children were there to see the sights.

This was a very special day for the campers, too, and they were there to offer their wares to any of the visitors who might be interested. Bob Currie found that he could buy a roast of beef and mother stocked up in groceries at Tim's store. She also stopped at the tinsmith's to pick up a special kind of skimmer he had promised to make her. It was a cone shaped dipper with a long handle, which she wanted to use for removing the cream from the long milk cans. The men had left their plough shares at the blacksmith's tent to be sharpened.

Mort and Jane finally broke away from their elders and went exploring on their own. It was fun to read the signs, "Best Wares Under Canvas." They found the barber's tent doing a thriving business. Some of the men looked as if they had not taken time for a shave or a haircut since their arrival three months ago. Jane was fascinated as she watched one man in the chair being trimmed up. The black locks fell in clouds around him and then the barber started on the man's whiskers. "Gee," she exploded, turning to Mort, "he's a young man under all that hair. Want to get your hair cut, Mort?"

"My dad cuts my hair," answered Mort, "and mother cuts his."

"Look at this Mort. Wood twelve dollars a load. Water fifty cents a barrel. Who's going to buy water by the barrel?" laughed Jane.

"Gosh, I'm glad we have a slough," said Mort, "and can haul our own wood."

They wandered on and came to a big tent that said, "Dominion Hotel."

Jane laughed and pointed. "Hotel," she cried. Then she lifted the flap and peeked in. "Nothing but bunks. How can they call that a hotel!"

"You shouldn't have done that," Mort gasped. He looked around quickly to be sure no one had noticed, then couldn't resist a peek himself.

The children passed on to the tent where the harness and saddles were displayed. "Oh, Mort, wouldn't you love one of those shiny new saddles?" exclaimed Jane, her eyes fairly dancing.

"Naw, who wants a saddle when he can ride bareback," answered Mort, his face twisted scornfully.

"Well, I do," snapped Jane tossing her curls.

"A girl would."

"Children, we're starting home now," called Mother, coming out of Tim's store that had a big sign, General Store, Biggest and Best Under Canvas. "Your father's just picking up the plough shares he brought to be sharpened."

"You're tired, Mom," Mort told her.

"A little, but it's been fun."

"We don't need to start as soon as you do. We'll soon catch up," Mort told her.

"Don't be too long. You've had a good day," his mother reminded him.

Jane and Mort waved to their parents as they started for home in the buckboard. Then they returned to their sightseeing. At the baker's they bought some buns and discovered that bread was selling at twenty-five cents a loaf.

"Good thing we make our own," said Jane.

"Teamsters wanted here, Mort, better get yourself a job. Ten dollars a day. I bet the railway company needs teamsters," Jane piped. There seemed to be no limit to her energy.

But it was in front of the book store tent that Mort's eyes grew wistful. This was where he'd like to get a job. How wonderful to be able to read all the books you wanted. Just wait, some day he'd have a roomful of books. They'd reach the ceiling. Turning to Jane he said sharply, "Let's get out of here."

Mort's pinto was no match for Jane's sleek brown mare. They started off walking their ponies. As they neared the creek, Jane dug her heels into the mare's sides and the animal sprang forward, taking the creek at a single bound. Mort followed more slowly. It always annoyed him to see her brown mare outrun Wi-ya-ka.

Some imp of mischief made Jane leave the trail and start across the prairie on the dead run. She came to a fold in the plain where the creek doubled back. As the mare rose to take the leap something went wrong. Mort saw her shoot over the animal's head, land heavily on the ground, and remain there.

When Mort reached her she was white and still, her small face turned to the sky.

"Jane! Jane! speak to me. Speak to me," he shouted shaking her gently. There was no sound nor movement from Jane.

He found an old can and ran with it to the creek for water. He poured water on her face. He rubbed her hands. Still she did not move. He looked around helplessly. What could he do? The sun was disappearing behind a heavy bank of clouds. What if it should start to rain? He dared not move her. She might have broken something. He would have to leave her and go for help.

He found a piece of rope with which he hobbled the brown mare to keep her from wandering off. Then he mounted Wi-ya-ka and rode for dear life hoping to overtake the buckboard before it had reached the home-stead. Much valuable time had been lost and the family was just turning into the yard as Mort rode up.

"Dad," he shouted, his breath coming in hard gulps, "Jane has been hurt. Come with the buckboard to fetch her." The pinto sensing excitement in the air danced, impatient to be off again.

Mr. Mason came over to Mort. "What's happened?" he asked.

"Brownie's thrown Jane," the boy replied. He looked beaten. "Mr. Mason, I'm sorry. I didn't take very good care of her."

"Don't blame yourself, Mort. She's as wild as a young fawn. T'would have been the same if I'd been there."

"Come, Sam, we'll go back. The women can stay. Mort, you lead the way." Mr. Currie had taken things in his own hands.

Mort didn't spare the pinto on the way back to the spot where he had left Jane. As he drew near, however, he slowed the horse to a walk, leaned forward, his face puckered in bewilderment. There was the can he had used. There was the mark in the grass where Jane had been lying. The grass was trampled and flattened down. There was no sign of Jane.

CHAPTER IX

SNAKES IN THE GRASS

Fear and amazement looked out of Mort's eyes as they sought his father's.

"But Dad, I left her here. I've been gone such a short time. What could have happened?"

Bob Currie shook his head. "You've probably been gone longer than you think. No doubt someone passing has picked her up," he replied.

"I hope it wasn't the Indians," said Sam Mason, his voice trembling.

"She'd be perfectly safe with the Indians around here," assured Bob. "But let's get going. If someone has picked her up they'll have taken her to the doctor."

Meantime Mort had dropped to his knees and was examining the markings. Raising his head he announced, "They were not Indians. There was just one person, a man, and he was wearing shoes."

Following the marks Mort learned that the man was driving a light vehicle and had led Brownie away with him. He also noticed that the party had taken a short cut through the creek to town. Mounting Wi-ya-ka, he again led the way, this time straight to Dr. Cotton's door.

They learned from Jane later that she had regained consciousness and finding herself alone, with night creeping in around her, had become frightened. She tried to raise herself and found that she was in terrific pain. What was she to do? She couldn't just lie there and let the coyotes get her. When she thought of the coyotes she became really frightened. Raising herself on her good elbow she let out the low, long whistles that Mort had taught her. Her call, winging its way into the prairie twilight, sounded eerie and frightening.

"I thought I was going to sleep again so I lay down," she told them. "The next thing I knew I was being lifted. I thought I was dreaming. A coyote was standing with its mouth open just two feet away. I tried to scream. Then someone spoke and I wakened and there was Dr. Cotton lifting me from the ground." She managed a twisted smile for them.

The doctor assured Sam Mason that his daughter would be all right. "Just a broken arm. But if I hadn't heard that whistle....?" Dr. Cotton smiled at the rather pathetic little face lying on the pillow. "She must stay here for a day or two. I will not allow my patient to be moved tonight."

"Will she be all right? What can I tell her mother?" asked Sam, his voice still muffled.

"Of course she'll be all right. Broken bones mend," replied the doctor not unkindly. "Tell her mother she'll be right as rain as soon as the bone knits. I'm afraid she'll have to travel on foot for a while, though."

Jane was so glad to be comfortable that even the prospect of not being able to ride Brownie did not bother her.

The men knew the little girl would have the best of care but hated to go home without her.

Mort slipped back into the room after the others had left. He stood poking his fingers through the holes in the old straw hat.

"Gee, I'm sorry, Jane. Guess I'm not much good at taking care of you after all. Does it hurt awful?"

"No, it doesn't hurt much now if I keep perfectly still. But, oh, Mort, it was awful out there on the prairie when I thought you'd left me to be eaten by the coyotes."

"I had to get help. I never expected anyone to be passing. I knew I shouldn't move you." Mort's face was twisted and his mouth shut in a hard line.

"Anyway, why can't you behave yourself? What made you dart off across the fields like a wild—a wild—hare?" he finished lamely.

Jane grinned through her tears. "I wanted you to chase me."

"Well, I chased you, all right," retorted Mort.

At that moment the doctor entered and told Mort he would have to leave.

"If you want to help Jane, young man, you had better leave. What my patient needs now is sleep."

Mort, left to himself, sniffed slightly as he went downstairs. He didn't overwork the Pinto going home that night. He walked him most of the way.

After a short time Jane was up and about but her arm was bandaged tightly to her side. Their exploring now was done mostly on foot. One warm sunny day in September, when Mort had some time off, he called for Jane. She could feel excitement in the air.

"Come," he announced, "I have something to show you." He led her to a spot in their own field where the land sloped to the south and dipped into the ravine which passed in front of the house. Here the low spots were sheltered from any breeze and at the same time caught the warmth of the sun. Mort halted on the edge of the ravine.

"Look," he said pointing to one of these hollows, his own eyes intent on the scene before him. Hearing no sound he turned to look at Jane. She was standing as one hypnotized, her face blanched, eyes and mouth wide and she was struggling to get her breath.

Mort caught her roughly, giving her a shake. "Stop looking like that, you silly thing," he shouted at her angrily. She tore her eyes slowly from the spot and her breath came at last in a shuddering gasp.

"Oh, Mort, it's awful. Hear the noise they're making."

"Yes, they're making a noise, all right, but they won't hurt you. Why weren't you a boy? You're always getting into trouble, breaking your collar-bone, getting scared half to death by a few harmless snakes."

"I didn't either. It was my arm."

"Well it was near your collar-bone. And a few snakes won't hurt you."

"A few snakes, millions of snakes you mean!" retorted Jane her color returning with her rising temper. However, she could not resist going back for another look. She shivered as she looked.

The snakes were packed closely together making an intricate pattern, black, yellow, gold and green, from which the sunlight glinted. The heads alone, with their glittering eyes, were distinguishable. As if by some secret signal, each forked tongue would shoot from its mouth and one mighty hiss would shatter the stillness. Jane shuddered.

"Will they stay here?" she asked. "I'll be afraid to walk in the grass."

"No, they'll find some place to hide away for the winter. I guess they're having one last sunning before curling up for their long sleep," answered Mort.

Now that her fear was over, Jane was fascinated. There was beauty in every fold of those long coiled bodies. The sunlight gilded the pattern with gold.

As they turned to leave the ravine they startled a flock of prairie chickens from the oat field. Bob had cut the oats with a scythe and they were spread out on the field waiting to be gathered in for the winter feed. This field made a wonderful picnic ground for many stray flocks of prairie chickens.

"We had prairie chicken and gooseberry pie for dinner today," boasted Mort.

"I don't like gooseberry pie and I bet the wild chicken didn't taste very good either. Where did you get the gooseberries?" asked Jane, curiosity getting the better of her.

"The last time Little Bear was here he brought us a pail of gooseberries and one of black currants. He says they're thick north of the valley towards Long Lake," replied Mort.

"Next year we'll make a picnic and go berry picking," said Jane laughing.

"Yes, and I suppose you'll break your other arm. When can you go riding again?"

"I don't know. Not for a long time, I guess."

Mort had his eye on a big hawk that kept circling around the barn. "I'm going to call Dad," he said "Get him to shoot that thing before it gets another chicken." Mort went to the house and Jane started across the field for home.

That night, as the Currie family sat around the fire after supper, Bob announced that he and Sam would go to the valley and begin cutting their winter supply of wood the next day. "Better get it over with before the weather breaks. It doesn't look as if we were going to get any rain, though."

"How long will you be gone?" asked Mother anxiously.

"That's the point, I don't know. Mort, you'll be the only man to look after two places. Think you can manage?" asked his dad.

"Sure, there'll just be the ordinary work to do. I'd like to be going along, though," Mort added a little wistfully.

"Too bad, but you know we couldn't leave the women without a man around. Adventure sometimes comes in most unexpected places."

Next morning at the hour before dawn, Bob and Sam, each with his own wagon and team of oxen stood ready. They had plenty of bread and salt pork to last them several days.

"Good luck, Mort, don't let the coyotes or the hawks get the chickens, and take care of Mother," called Bob.

Mort and his mother stood in the chill just before sunrise and watched the wagons, each with a man walking beside it, wind down the grassy trail.

"Well I guess it's up to us now. We'd better get the cows." Mrs. Currie smiled at her son.

CHAPTER X

THE PRAIRIE FIRE

Mort looked up from digging potatoes and sniffed. Smoke. Sure enough—fire—a prairie fire and Dad not at home. Mort straightened his back and looked. Away to the northeast the sky was darkening. But it was not a rain cloud that was rolling in. It was smoke. Fanned by a northeast wind the fire would be on them in no time. The wind was driving the smoke straight at him. This was the enemy the settlers feared above all others. For months there had been no rain. Sloughs had dried up and the grass was as dry as tinder. The fire was travelling at a terrific pace.

Bob Currie had told his family what to do in case of fire and Mort lost no time now in carrying out his instructions. Dropping his hoe he ran for the pinto. Bob had ploughed two wide strips around the buildings and had burned off the grass on the intervening space. The grass close to the buildings had been tramped down and cropped off by the stock. True the sod buildings would not burn but there was much around the place that would. Mort knew he must save their precious field of oats, and the stacks of prairie hay, the winter's supply of food for the stock.

In the matter of minutes he had the pony hitched to the stone boat. He sprang to its back, and drove at top speed into the middle of the slough. During the summer drought the water in the ravine had dwindled. It was only Bob's forethought in digging a shallow well in what had been a deep ravine, which left them now with a fairly good supply of water.

Mort filled the two barrels on the stone boat from this well. He placed gunny sacks, held in place by metal bands, over the tops of the barrels and headed back for the fire. Although this had taken but a few moments the boy realized that the fire was much closer.

It was a terrifying sight. He judged the flames were rising twenty feet into the air, near enough now that he could hear the roar. Close to the ground the monster was deep black. Shooting tongues of flame came from its huge jaws licking up the prairie grass like a cat stealing cream. Up, up, rose the great billows of grey smoke until it seemed as if the earth and heaven would be consumed.



Sheeting tongues of flame came from the monster's jaws.

Mort wasted no time in contemplating, but snatching up every available sack or old coat, he made for the fire. When near the fire Wi-ya-ka became terrified by heat and smoke and refused to go nearer. Mort coaxed but the pony braced his front feet, shook his head and refused to move. Mort had taken him along the line between the fire and the field of oats. He must save their precious feed. He made blinders of wet cloth for Wi-ya-ka's eyes. Soaking all the other materials he had brought, he strung them out in a chain behind the horse. Then mounting the pony he galloped back and forth between the oats and on-coming fire dragging

the wet sacking, stopping repeatedly to wet the sacks, until the grass was thoroughly soaked.

By this time the fire was upon him. He bandaged the pony's eyes and his own, and drove the pony through the fire to safety on the burned ground. He came back to fight. The monster was slowing. The wet grass was not so palatable. Mort chuckled. His face was blackened, his eyes red rimmed, but he fought on furiously. He was winning. Out of the corner of his eye he could see his mother near the house with pail and broom beating out the red tongues darting at her across the guard.

To his right dark objects were moving about in the smoke. He could hear men shouting and horses galloping but he didn't try to find out what was going on. He just knew that he had to save their field of oats. He straightened his back for a moment and faced into the wind. Then he smiled. The wind had veered slightly more to the west and was carrying the fiercest blaze to the east of his field. He saw that the men were closing in on him. He no longer felt alone.

The danger to the oats was past but he fought on, a song in his heart. He seemed to feel neither heat nor fatigue. "Take that, and that, you villain. You'll not gorge your worthless self on our oats. Oh, if Dad were only here! Mom thought that Mr. Mason and Dad might be home today, but they can't make it before dark and we'll have you licked long before dark."

His head began to feel queer but his arms moved mechanically. Something strange was happening to him but he still struck out madly with his wet sack. The wheels in his head kept grinding out, "Take that, take that, take—". Then the sack wouldn't move any more. He couldn't see. There was a blackout. He staggered a few steps. The wet sack dropped from his hands. He stumbled a step or two further and then down, down . . . down . . . his head struck something hard . . .

Mort tried to move. He tried to open his eyes. Nothing happened. His body felt heavy as if a great weight were upon him. It was too much trouble. He couldn't fight any more so just let his eyes stay shut. He must have slept. The fire was coming at him again. It's roar was deafening. He was choked by smoke but he couldn't do anything about it. Sometime later he succeeded in raising his heavy lids a crack. He could see a glow, a brightness. Why couldn't they get the fire out! He tried to shout. No sound came and the heavy lids dropped again. He could smell the fire. Why couldn't somebody do something! Again he must have slept...

Finally he made a supreme effort, opened his eyes and tried to sit up. Somebody pushed him gently back. He must do something. Fire! Fire!

"It's all right, dear. It's all right. The fire is out." That was his mother's voice.

Mort's face puckered and his eyes held a strange wild look as he struggled to speak. "No, no," then his face twisted like a small boy's about to cry. "I smell smoke."

"Yes, dear, you can still smell smoke but the fire's out. Don't worry any more about it. Try to sleep." His mother's hand touched his forehead ever so lightly as the skin was tender from the heat.

The tired lids dropped again. When they raised later they seemed to have lost some of their weight. The lamps were lit and his mother was sitting by his bunk. "Dad," he called, "when did you get back?" Bob Currie was sitting near the stove, smoking.

"Had to come and help you fight that fire. Howya feeling?"

Mort tried to lift his hands and to his amazement found that they were bandaged. "What's all this mean?" he asked looking at his mother.

"Your hands are burned, dear, not too badly but they're going to be sore, for awhile."

Something beside him moved; it pushed against him. He could feel it now, moist and warm, close to his arm.

"Hello, Skip, were you in the fire?" he asked looking out of the corner of his eye.

The dog crowded further onto the bed while his tail beat a tattoo on the floor.

"Down, Skip," Mother commanded. "You'll have to be content to sit and look at Mort for a time."

Skip sat tight against the bunk, his chin resting on the blanket by Mort's arm.

"What time is it?" asked Mort, still bewildered. "Nine o'clock and I'm going to get you some hot milk; you must be starved," answered his mother.

"I guess I am hungry. I must have slept a long time."

His mother brought some good milk soup which she fed him, making a joke about her little boy. The business of eating was scarcely over when a gentle tap was heard on the door and Jane entered. She paused at the door, a scared look on her round, chubby face and her rabbit nose twitching. When she saw Mort smiling at her, the laughter bubbled.

"Oh, Mort, you're all right! You're all right!" She was about to bound onto the bunk when Mrs. Currie put her hand out and stopped her.

"But he is all right, isn't he?" she asked turning sharply to Mrs. Currie.

"Yes, he's fine. His hands and face have been scorched and are very sore."

"Oh, Mort, do they hurt much?" she asked, her face twisting as if she were feeling the hurt.

Mort laughed, "No, they don't hurt while they're still. They're like your arm."

She climbed gingerly upon the couch, her plump little legs sticking out straight in front of her. "Gee, Mort, you were good, I guess you're a hero. You don't have to die to be a hero, do you?"

Mort, laughed. "No, a hero doesn't have to die. But I'm no hero, Jane," Mort was puzzled. "Were you here all afternoon?"

The little girl nodded. Her eyes were big and troubled. "I sat on that stool and just watched you."

"Was the lamp lit when I wakened myself talking about the fire?"

Again the little girl nodded.

"And there were people here?"

"Yes, a lot of men rode out from town and helped put out the fire. Every person in the country was fighting—your mother, my mother. They all said you should have a medal." Jane was beginning to get excited again and the words tumbled out. "Only the town hadn't gotten that far yet. They didn't have any medals. Couldn't even mention you in the daily paper 'cause there's no paper. But I don't care about the medal as long as you get better. You will, won't you?"

Mort laughed. "I will. I'm better now. Did mother feed them? The men, I mean,"

"Yes, she gave them tea and sandwiches. Mummy came over, too." Then Jane started to giggle. "The poor oxen never travelled so fast before. Your dad came on with Mr. Moore in his buckboard—you know the blacksmith, who sharpened the ploughshares, and Daddy had to bring the two loads and two teams. He said he never knew that oxen could be so 'All fires slow'."

"Oh, Jane, what about the oats?"

"Never touched a straw. That's what Daddy said." She grinned at him.

"Jane, dear," Mrs. Currie said, coming over and putting her hand on the rich auburn curls, "time a little girl was in bed and it's high time our patient was asleep. You may come over to see him first thing in the morning. I see your mother has the light in the window for you."

"Bye, Jane, see you in the morning," called Mort.

CHAPTER XI

NEW VENTURES

For some time Mort's hands were a great handicap to him. It irked him not to be able to do anything. He tried riding but he did have to guide even the pinto a little and the reins hurt his fingers. However, the burns steadily improved and life again became interesting.

Bob Currie seemed not to know fatigue. He worked from dawn until long after dark. "There will be plenty of time to rest when winter sets in," he would say.

One day in the fall he returned from town with another team of horses. One was a tall, slight bay with rather a restless eye. Mort suggested they call her Ginger. The other was a plump little iron grey mare that Mother named, Fanny.

"A little misnamed," Bob grinned. "But horses, nevertheless. They'll be able to move faster than Buck and Bright, and we must get some ploughing ready for spring. The winter snows will be a great help in breaking down the sod." His hopes were short lived.

Next morning, while Mort was gathering in the oats, he heard a call for help. His father had started off in high spirits to begin ploughing. Mort saw him now belaboring the back of the grey with the reins. No amount of coaxing by word or whip had any effect on the animal. She stood, head up, feet braced and absolutely refused to move.

Mort came on the run. He threw an arm around the mare's neck; his hand softly stroked her neck and under her chin. At the same time he kept up a gentle crooning sound in her ear. Little by little the taut muscles began to relax. She tossed her head up and down a few times, then started to move forward. She moved slowly at first; then her speed increased until Bob

had to run to keep up. However, he made the share bite deeply into the sod and soon the stubborn animal suited her pace to his.

"I've heard of baulky horses before," growled Bob, "but this is the first time I've ever tried to drive one." Mort travelled along with his father for some time to be sure Fanny would not stop again. When they came to the end of the furrow he stroked her neck and whistled softly through his teeth, his cheek resting on the mare's neck. He was beginning to understand something of Little Bear's magic with animals.

During the remainder of that day Fanny gave no further trouble. Mort was to learn, however, that he must hold himself in readiness to answer a call at any time when his father was ploughing. Bob was delighted at the speed with which the ploughing was progressing. He could now accomplish much more than he had been able to do with the oxen, but when Fanny took a stubborn streak Mort was the only one who could make her move.

It was shortly after this that Bob had a visitor. A Mr. Neil had driven out to the field to talk to Bob. Mort and his mother noticed that the team had been standing idle for a long time and that Bob was standing with his head down apparently deep in thought. Finally the two men, leaving the work team standing and leading Mr. Neil's bays, were coming towards the house.

"Maggie, this is Mr. Neil; he's a stock dealer from town. My wife, sir."

"I've been trying to talk business with your husband but, as he says it may mean considerable work for you, he refuses to commit himself until you have given your consent," Mr. Neil explained, shaking hands with Mrs. Currie.

"It sounds very mysterious and interesting. Come inside where we may sit down while we talk," invited Mrs. Currie, leading the way.

Their visitor stepped inside and then stood still looking about the trim little home. Mort never took his eyes from the man's face. He noticed with pride how the stranger's gaze was held by the splash of bright color in its home-made frame.

Mr. Neil turned to his hostess. "Those are our own prairie roses," he mused. With head to one side, brow puckered, he returned to study the picture. Then turning again to Mrs. Currie, he asked, "Did you paint that since coming out here?"

"Yes," she replied with a pleased smile. "They were so beautiful I couldn't resist it."

"Now I know you're the kind of people I want to do business with. You've only been here about five months and see the start you've made." He was looking directly at Bob.

Bob shifted uneasily on his wooden box. "Yes," he said slowly, "but you see we've bitten off just about all we can handle. I've got to get some ploughing done before the snow flies."

"Since you've come here to consult me, wouldn't it be a good idea to tell me what you two are talking about?" suggested Mrs. Currie looking from one to the other.

"Right you are," smiled Bob. "Mr. Neil has a half-dozen head of cattle he wants to find a home for. He wants us to take them on shares. He supplies the stock. We furnish feed and care and he takes one-third of the increase."

Mrs. Currie sat staring at her husband, her eyes growing large and round. Then a smile began to dawn in those eyes. "Bob, that's fine. Why do you hesitate?" Mother was thinking of the one small crock of butter cached away for winter use.

"You don't understand, Maggie; I haven't the feed. I've only enough away for the stock I have. As I understand it, once the snow comes, cattle can't feed in the open."

"Look, Mr. Currie, perhaps I can help you there. There's an outfit near town that has the contract for putting up hay for the Mounted Police. If I could persuade them to give you one day, they could, no doubt, put up enough hay from that meadow of yours to see you through the winter. What do you say?" . . .

With the dawn a few days later came two men with mower and rake. They started in on Bob's meadow and by nightfall there was a good supply of prairie wool waiting to be stacked for winter's feed.

Then the following day Mort and his father rode to town taking Skip with them, and brought back the cattle. If they thought they'd trouble with Fanny they were to find that their troubles were only beginning. Among the cattle was one short horned beast, wild as a March hare, and where she led, the others followed. When she decided to exercise, her nose would go out in front and her tail would rise stiff as a rudder behind and she would run until she passed out of sight. The other cattle might be feeding peacefully but at her signal they were all off like buffaloes stampeding.

Bob soon learned that a good stout rope, well pegged into the ground, was the only thing that would hold her.

Bob and Mort stood in the yard surveying their little outfit. "Not a bad start, Mort," smiled Bob. They had gathered around them a few chickens, one rooster they were fattening for the Christmas dinner, five horses and their little herd of cattle, not to mention the two oxen. The whole family had a special place in their hearts for the oxen. For, was it not the oxen that had brought them safely through the hardships of the trail?

"We might butcher one of those oxen for our winter's meat," continued Bob.

Mort looked up at him and shook his head, "No, Dad."

Bob smiled down at his son, "I don't think much of the idea either, son."

The following Saturday, Bob drove into Regina for supplies. Mort and his mother had the milking done and all the small chores attended to when night settled in and still there was no sign of Bob. "I can't understand what's keeping your father," said mother having gone out to look and listen for the twentieth time.

"Maybe he has found someone to visit with. You know Dad. He loves to talk," added Mort a little lamely.

"Yes, I know, but it is getting late. You go to bed, Mort. I think I'll walk up the trail a bit, to meet him," she looked wistfully at Mort. "We'll leave the lamps in the window."

"I'll go with you," said Mort, jumping to his feet. Skip rose from the mat at the door, his tail wagging in anticipation, ready to follow.

Seeing the boy's eagerness she agreed. "We can't go far and leave the lamps burning."

It wasn't like Bob to be late, and heavy were the hearts that waited for him. At last they could make out some object moving on the trail. There was something queer about it. A man appeared to be walking and leading a horse.

Then Mort made a wild dash and shouted, "Dad, Dad." He was right. Bob Currie was walking beside the buckboard leading the little grey mare. He managed a weak smile as he said, "Where do you think you're going?"

"Bob, what ever happened?" asked his wife falling into step beside him and taking his arm. Mort's eyes were wide and questioning but he said nothing after his first eager shout.

"Lost her, Maggie. I'm sorry." His face was grey and beaten.

"Of course it had to be Ginger," mused his wife.

Bob gave a mirthless chuckle. "Fanny's even too stubborn to die," but he patted her neck affectionately as he said it.

"But, Dad, tell us what happened. We still don't know what happened," exclaimed Mort, who couldn't restrain his impatience any longer.

"Here, Mort, take Fanny," Bob said, handing over the reins. "I drove into the creek to water the horses on the way home and I must have gotten into one of those alkali bogs. Ginger went down pulling Fanny with her. Before I could get them untangled Ginger had drowned. That's the story. Now put the mare in the stable."

Mort stood there with his head down. His father and mother gathered up the parcels from the buckboard and turned towards the house.

Mort finally threw up his head and jerked at Fanny's bridle strap. The mare drew back, stretched her neck and whinnied. She was restive. Once in the barn she whinnied again and was uneasy in the stall. Mort removed the harness and hung it on the peg at the back of her stall; then he went out and brought Ginger's and hung it on the other peg. The grey danced and whinnied when he came in.

The boy went slowly to her, stroked her neck and buried his face on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Fanny, I misjudged you. You miss her, too. Well, you'll have to get used to it because Ginger isn't ever coming back." He turned and walked slowly to the house.

Some sense of sorrow and loss must have reached the heart of this little grey mare for from that day on she never refused to do as she was asked. It was as if in her own animal way she was trying to atone for their great loss, or perhaps she, too, was lonely.

Bob sat down to the meal his wife had kept warm for him but he had no appetite. After a few unsuccessful

attempts he slid back from the table and took out his old black pipe. Mrs. Currie was busy clearing the table when Mort pushed the door open and shuffled into the room. His face was white and drawn. The lantern slid from his hand to the floor.

His father looked up and smiled at him. "Everything finished up at the barn?"

Mort nodded. "Dad," he mumbled, "You didn't . . . Ginger isn't . . .?"

Bob removed his pipe from his mouth before answering. "No, Mort, Ginger isn't lying out for the coyotes. That's why I was so late. Now, son, you'd better wash your face and get to bed. Things will look better in the morning. They always do. Good night."

When Mort climbed into bed that night, he buried his face deep in the crack between the bunk and the wall and neither moved nor spoke.

CHAPTER XII

THE FIRST BLIZZARD

By the time the winter snow flew the Currie family had dug themselves in. They had built a sod lean-to, or shed, over the back door and had nailed the front door shut against the cold winds. Mother had pasted strips of cotton over the cracks around the door and had covered these with paper. It would be hard, for even prairie winds, to get through all that. The wood, which Bob had brought home earlier from the coulee, had been built up Indian teepee fashion to allow the poles to dry out thoroughly. In odd moments he and Mort had cut much of this wood into stove lengths and a goodly supply was now neatly piled in one end of the shed. Bob had been able to get a couple of tons of coal, at twenty-four dollars a ton; he could not afford more. Then, too, when rain had driven them indoors Mort and Bob had spent their time digging a cellar in the shed.

Now this cellar was filled with potatoes, carrots, turnips, onions and cabbage from their own garden. Mother was very proud of her garden. "And you didn't even want to plough the land for me," she chided. The vegetables in the cellar were covered with a thick blanket of straw to prevent freezing. At either side of the door stood a wooden barrel, which Mort was responsible for keeping filled, either with water or with snow.

It had been a grey unpleasant day near the first of December. The skies seemed heavy with snow, but Bob had insisted he must drive to town for supplies. Evening closed in early that day. Mort and his mother had the stock in the barn, the milking done, calves fed, when a cold drizzle started, which soon turned to snow. The hard particles of snow beat against the

fragile panes as if determined to break through. "I wish your father were home," Mother complained.

"Sit down, Mom; you can't bring him any faster that way," Mort pleaded.

"Mort, I wish we had started a diary when we left the East. This is a very important date. Our first snow on the prairie."

Just then the team came to a halt outside the door. Both Mort and his mother jumped to meet them.

Bob Currie looked like an overgrown teddy-bear in his buffalo skin coat as he climbed from the wagon. A big cap of the same fur was drawn well down over his head. Icicles were beginning to form on his mustache. He grinned at them.

"For gosh sakes, Dad, I didn't know you. Where did you get that coat?"

Bob turned himself about to give them a good look. "Got it at Tim's store. Just the thing for winter; never feel the cold wind through this."

"I'm so glad you have a warm coat, Bob." His wife's voice had a slight tremor.

"Well, let's get this stuff in. Didn't make it any too soon. Here, Mort, give me a hand with this load," he called.

They unloaded a couple of hundred pound sacks of flour, a small sack of shorts (a fine meal next to the bran in milling flour, which when mixed with a little white flour, made Mort's favorite porridge). There was also a quarter of beef and a side of pork.

"You'll never guess what else I have out here in this wagon box," teased Bob, his grey eyes twinkling.

"I know," said Mort, "I know, but I won't tell."

"How do you know?" asked Bob.

"Got a good nose," his son replied.

The men went back to the wagon and appeared shortly rolling what appeared to be a heavy barrel.

"Oh," mother exclaimed, "Can it be possible that you have a barrel of apples?"

Bob chuckled, "Looks like that to me. Found them at the express office. Lucky I went in today. They'd have been frozen with the temperature going down like this."

"But where did they come from?" asked mother, bewildered.

"From Sam Johnstone. Good old Sam, sent us a barrel of his best Northern Spies. That should keep us healthy this winter."

"Where can we keep them? They'll be too warm in here and they'll freeze in the lean-to."

It was Mort who had the bright idea of sinking the barrel in a hole in the corner of the shack. They'd be kept cool by the moist earth and there would be no danger of frost.

After the horses had been put away and supper over Bob sat down at the rough board table and took out his bank book. There was a pleased, satisfied expression on his kindly face, as he looked across at his wife. "Well, Maggie, we've made a good start. We can hibernate very comfortably until the spring."

Mrs. Currie's head was bent a little lower than seemed necessary over the heavy wool socks she was knitting for Mort. "If no one takes sick," she whispered.

Bob blinked as if to drive off the fear that for one short second showed in his own eyes. "Nobody's going to get sick. Anyway Doctor Cotton's in Regina and remember that's only five miles away. Cap can cover that distance in no time."

Mother let her knitting drop to her lap as she looked at her husband. "This is a strange, fierce country, Bob. For centuries it has been waiting for someone with the courage to conquer it. It's not going to be easy. Now winter is upon us. It's just a little terrifying."

"Nonsense, Maggie. It's going to be fun. We'll have time to relax a little. You'll be able to give some time to Mort's studies. How fortunate that I married a school teacher, eh son?"

"Yes, Mort," said his mother glancing at the boy who had been sitting so still, as he listened to this conversation, wondering if his mother really regretted having come to this wild new country, "beginning tomorrow you must give some time every day to your school work."

The boy glanced over to the shelf and sighed. On that shelf were the precious books they had managed to bring with them, the Bible, Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, Frank Merriwell's School Days, Pilgrim's Progress, David Copperfield and a number of school books. He remembered standing in front of the tent used as a book store, and wishing he could get a job working in that store. What wouldn't he give for a chance to read all the books he wanted.

The wind still howled and sleet lashed at the window panes, but inside, the shack was cosy and comfortable. Mort and his dad had built well when they built their sod home.

Bob studied the bank book in his hand for some moments without speaking. Then raising his head he smiled across at his wife. "Maggie, I think we've done well."

"You did, you mean. I hope you don't think you can keep on working like this," answered his wife.

"We won't have to work like this when we get everything going. When we sold our little place in the East, we had a little over four thousand dollars. Today we have one hundred and sixty acres of good land, which cost us ten dollars, a house and barn, fuel to last us through the winter, I hope; flour, meat, all the vegetables we can eat, nothing to worry about if we have to stay here all winter, and nearly three thousand dollars to our credit in the Bank of Montreal in Regina."

"Don't forget the apples," piped up Mort. "Couldn't we open the barrel now?"

"You bet, a Spy would taste mighty good just now," replied his father.

Mrs. Currie's eyes were drawn to the window again, her brow puckered into an anxious frown.

"You are jumpy tonight, Maggie," said her husband.

"I can't help but wonder if anyone is out in that storm," she answered, her eyes full of anxiety were raised to meet his. "Ours and the Masons are the only houses in miles."

"Nonsense, there's nothing to worry about anyway. Just a bit of sleet and wind. Here, we've forgotten the Montreal Witness. Got to get on with that story, haven't we, Mort?"

"Sure thing. You remember, Mom, how it stopped in the most exciting place just like you do when you're reading the book and say, 'all for tonight . . .' I'll get it. It's sticking out of Dad's pocket."



Mort and Bob loved to listen to Mother read.

Mort handed her the paper and then flopped on his stomach on the bunk, elbows on the bed, his palms cupped his chin. His sock toe drummed in eager expectation.

Maggie Currie had a pleasant Scotch voice and both Mort and Bob loved to relax and listen to her read. Bob had perched on the other bunk and was sitting with eyes closed and the old black pipe hanging from his mouth. All at once both men were startled into a upright position by Maggie jumping to her feet and dropping the paper. "I knew it," she declared. "I knew it."

Both Mort and his father stared at her, mouth and eyes wide. Then they heard it too. Someone was in the lean-to. They could hear him moving. Like something shot from a bow Mort catapulted to the door and swung it open. In the dim light he could make out a foreign shape. "Who's there?" he shouted as he lit a match.

The figure turned and faced him. "Very cold. Very wet," announced the stranger.

"Who are you and where did you come from?" asked Mort.

"Little Feather," replied the stranger. "Look for horse."

"Come in," invited Mr. Currie, who had followed Mort to the door. "Did you find your horse?"

"No, snow hide track."

"You poor man," said mother coming forward. "Take his blanket, Bob, and hang it on the line behind the stove. I'll get you some hot soup."

"Do you know Little Bear?" asked Mort moving closer to the Indian.

A small spark lit in the Indian's eye and he nodded, "Yes."

"It is a long time since I have seen him. Is he well?" Mort asked.

Again Little Feather nodded.

"Will you take a message to him?"

Little Feather made no reply but turned to face the fire. Mort couldn't tell whether he had understood the question or not. Taking for granted that further conversation was useless he returned to his bunk. Their reading for the evening was finished so the boy turned to his school books. This time it was a history book. While living on the prairie he would learn all he could about other parts of the world. Tonight England claimed his attention.

When Bob took the lantern and started out to make his final rounds of the stock, Mort looked up from his school work. He sat with his pencil poised and a faint smile on his eager young face, as he listened to his father's soft whistle. He saw in his mind's eye the greeting of the friendly stock, the horses tossing their heads, the cows contentedly chewing their cuds. The chickens would murmur, impatient at being disturbed. Then he turned his attention again to his studies as eager to be ready for the future as he was to enjoy the present.

That night, his blanket dry and warm, Little Feather curled up in a corner of the sod shack and slept soundly. The next morning dawned grey and unfriendly. The wind still rattled the window frames and blew in boisterous gusts against the house as if infuriated by this thing that stood in its path.

No amount of coaxing, however, could persuade Little Feather to remain with the Curries. He must find his horse, he said, and started off on foot towards town.

The days that followed were lazy, happy days for Mort and his father. Much of Mort's time was given to his books. He was keen and anxious to learn and his mother made a very efficient teacher.

Bob's days were spent in caring for the animals which he loved. The evenings were looked forward

to by the whole family. There were quiet hours when, warm and comfortable, each did the thing he liked best.

Saturday, the ninth of December, the whole family made a trip to Regina. Bob thought he should replenish the supply of coal oil, and his tobacco was running low. When they returned there were various shapes and sizes of parcels to be tucked away. Bob had the strangest of all, a large awkward parcel wrapped up in gunny sacking. Mort never did know what happened to that parcel but he made sure it was not hidden anywhere in the house.

Both Mort and Bob spent many hours of each day at some mysterious work of their own. No questions were asked. However there was the suspicious sound of hammering coming from the lean-to where Mort was working and the barn where Bob spent his leisure hours.

As the days went by Mort often thought of Little Feather. No one seemed to know whether or not he had found his lost horse.

Friday night, December 15th, Bob stamped the snow from his felt boots as he announced, "I guess we're in for it." With his lantern he had just made the final rounds to be sure everything was all right. "Tonight I added a little extra to the feed supply, just in case, as I told the ponies."

"In for what, Bob?" asked mother, her face troubled.

Bob laughed as he caught her by the shoulders, giving her a playful shake.

"See here, young lady, are you going to get the heebie-jeebies everytime the wind rattles the window panes? We're as snug as a bug in a rug, so let her howl. I gave the stock a little extra feed. They'll be all right for a day or two."

"But it's the people who might be out that I'm worried about."

"Now tell me who there is to be out. We're not likely to have any visitors." Bob walked over to the window and picked up his pipe and tobacco. He grinned at her. "Glad I didn't forget my tobacco."

"Mort, you bring up a few apples. If your father can smoke, we'll eat the apples. Then we'll have some of our story. I'm really not nervous tonight," mother assured them.

The storm lasted three days. Sunday, Bob had tunneled his way out to feed the stock, taking with him some food for Skip. He tied a rope around his waist and with shovel in hand had started out. Mort clung to the other end of the rope. Bob told them later that nothing but the cold, wind-driven snow had told him that he had reached the open. He might have been dropped down in a well of snow. The barn and house were only little, white mounds.

Mort and his mother emptied the ashes and filled the barrels with snow while they waited. The time seemed unbearably long before Mort felt the welcome tug at the rope and began to haul it in.

Bub stumbled in puffing and blowing like a horse with the heaves. His buffalo coat was pasted with snow.

"How'd you know when you got to the barn?" Mort shouted.

"Luckily we left some tall corner poles sticking up, or I never would have known."

"How'd you get in when you did get there?"

"Dug my way through the roof," answered his father.

"I'm sure the poor creatures were glad to see you," said mother.

"They certainly were, such a mooing and whinnying you never heard and Skip nearly knocked me down. Any time you get tired of me in here, I'll move out with the stock."

The following Tuesday dawned clear and beautiful. Mort declared, "The sky is winking at us."

The air was crisp and the temperature low. They dug themselves out and stood on a vast stretch of whiteness with its myriads of diamonds blinding the eyes. The air was so clear and cold there seemed to be nothing over their heads. Space was limitless above as well as around them. The pale yellow sun was powerless to give warmth to this frigid waste.

A stabbing pain struck at Mort's eyes. He shut them tight only to find he couldn't hold them open again. He turned and stumbled into the house. "Mom," he called, his face twisted to ease the hurt. "What are we going to do? You can't see outside."

"I was afraid of that. I guess that's what causes snow blindness."

"What can we do, Mom?" Mort shrugged his shoulders and threw out his hands in a helpless gesture.

"We'll have to think of something." His mother sat down and drew Mort into the circle of her arm as she smiled proudly at him.

"You'll have a hard time thinking yourself out of this one." There was almost panie in his eyes. "What can we do?"

She smiled. "I have an idea. You run along and help dad clean up the barn. See you later," she called. With head down, and making his eyes mere slits, Mort started out for the barn.

"It's such a beautiful day and I can't see it," said Mort as he stopped for a moment and tried to watch the grey smoke rise from the white mound under which his home was buried. He looked across at the other hummock from which a wisp of smoke was also rising. He wondered how the Masons had survived the storm. It was a wonder Jane hadn't been over. On reaching the barn he hitched Wi-ya-ka to the stone boat to haul out manure. When the pony felt the hard snow under his feet Mort had a hard time to hold him. "Just you wait, old boy, just you wait; I'll give you a run for your money."

By noon the barn was fresh and clean and snow had been carried in for the animals. When they returned to the house, Mother held up several yards of what appeared to be mosquito netting.

"Where in the world did you get that? There are no mosquitoes now," Mort told her.

"It's not mosquito netting. It's a veil for your eyes, Mr. Smarty," replied his mother. "I dyed it. I brought some packages of diamond dyes with me, among them a green one. Now Mort, let me tie this over your eyes." She tied a double fold of the green cloth over Mort's eyes and sent him out into the brilliant sunshine. In a moment he was back shouting, "It works, Mom; it sure does. Have you some for Jane?"

"Yes, Mort, you may take this over to them and hurry back, for dinner's waiting."

That afternoon Mort and Jane went for a long swift gallop over the frozen snow, their woolen mufflers flying out behind them. They returned with very red faces and real prairie appetites.

CHAPTER XIII

MORT INVITES A GUEST

The next day was one of those jewel days on the prairie. Where the snow billowed, purple shadows stretched long fingers over the sparkling whiteness reaching beyond the vision to the horizon. The sun's golden sheen overlaid the whole countryside.

Mort came dashing into the house all excited, "Mom, do you want anything from town?"

"I don't think so. I didn't expect anyone would be going to town," answered his mother. "I thought our Christmas shopping was finished."

"Almost, but Dad says I may ride Pinto to town. Gosh, it's good to be out again! Mom...?"

"Yes, son, what is it?" inquired his mother, pausing in kneading the bread, her hands dripping dough over the pan.

Mort stood shifting his weight from one foot to the other and twisting his stocking cap. "Mom, are the Masons coming here for Christmas dinner?" he stammered.

"Of course they are, Mort. I told you they were coming. Don't tell me you're not pleased." His mother was puzzled.

"Yes... I'm glad, but..." he looked up at her pleadingly. "Could we have another guest?"

"There will be six of us and only one small rooster. Whom were you thinking of - Little Bear?"

Mort shook his head. "Couldn't we kill one of the hens?" he asked.

His mother shook her head. "We must keep them. We have to get a flock started in the spring."

Mort volunteered no further information. With chin resting on his chest he turned and shuffled from the house.

"Don't forget the green veiling," called his mother.

"Got it." Mort's colorless tone sounded very different from the gay ring of a moment before.

His father's cheery voice brought a faint smile to the boy's face. "Got your list?" shouted Bob.

"The only thing I have to get is our paint, I guess," Mort replied. The boy stood still for some time as if studying his dad's face, then he gave a low chuckle.

"What are you hatching, young man?" asked his father. "Looks as if it might mean trouble."

"I hope not," said Mort. "Don't expect me home until I get here. I might be late."

"Better not be too late. Your mother'll begin to worry."

"You tell her there won't be another storm so soon and I'll be all right." Pinto was standing saddled and waiting. Mort leapt lightly to his back and called, "Pinto will bring me home." He waved his mittenend hand as the pony's small feet thudded against the frozen snow.

When Mort reached town he made his way at once to the Mounted Police encampment. Almost immediately he ran into Johnny Stuart coming off duty.

"Well, sir, howya doing?" shouted Johnny. "I say, I'm just knocking off for a spot of lunch. How about joining me? We can have a good chin wag."

Mort's face lit up for a second and then the light faded as he shifted uneasily. "Come on," said his friend. "I know a good place over town. Biggest and best under canvas."

"I have my lunch with me," mumbled Mort remembering his empty pockets.

"Eat that before you go home. Let's get going." Johnny threw his arm around the boy's shoulder and started striding across the grounds, his shoes crunching the frozen snow.

Sitting opposite his friend, elbows resting on the bare board that served as a table, Mort beamed his happiness. The ride in the frosty air had whipped his cheeks to a bright, red glow. "Gee, Johnny, it's nice to have you in Regina. When did the Mounties come here?" he asked.

"I may not be here much of the time. This is to be our headquarters, though. Last September, Inspector Steele was sent here to decide on a site and on the sixth of December we moved in."

"I want to be a Mountie but I don't know very much about them. Tell me about them, Johnny."

"Well the Force will soon be ten years old. They were organized in 1873. Six troops, fifty men in each troop. Each troop rode different colored horses, brown, chestnut, black and light bay. First they planned to call the Force, Mounted Rifles."

"Why was the name changed?" asked Mort, leaning forward eagerly.

"The Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, wouldn't have it. Struck out Mounted Rifles; wrote in Mounted Police."

"What difference did the name make?" asked Mort.

"There was some confusion about Mounted Rifles. Sounded too much like a British regiment. The people south of the border thought the British might be moving in," explained Johnny.

"Ten years ago," muttered Mort. "There couldn't have been anything here but Indians and buffalo ten years ago."

"Oh, yes, there were traders. For two hundred years this country had been governed by the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1870 the Dominion Government took over control of the prairies. That meant they needed to have men here with authority to maintain law and order."

"What right did the Hudson's Bay Company have to control the great North West?" asked Mort.

"They were given that right by the Crown. The Company was given a charter or monopoly to trade in Rupert's Land, which meant, in all the land drained by the rivers flowing into Hudson's Bay."

"Does the Saskatchewan River drain into Hudson's Bay?" asked Mort.

"Yes, the traders could travel from the Bay to the foothills of the Rockies. In return for the privileges the Company agreed to maintain law and order throughout this vast territory, which they did until 1870."

Mort sat lost in his own thoughts for some time. Then looking up quickly he asked, "Johnny, have you seen Tom lately?"

Johnny's eyes widened in surprise. "No," he laughed, "and if ever I do it will be too soon."

Mort smiled weakly, "Tom's a good guy. I wish he'd get a homestead and settle down."

Johnny threw back his head and laughed. "Not him! That would mean honest work. You know Mort, whisky smuggling is one of the reasons for the Mounties. The Indians call whisky 'Firewater' and when they get it they're certainly savages on fire. Any man who gives it to the Indians doesn't deserve your sympathy."

"Still I wish we could help Tom." Mort was worried.

"I'm afraid he'll have to help himself." Johnny looked at his watch. "Hey, young fellow, it's time I was back on duty. More about the Mounties another day. Are you doing some last-minute Christmas shopping?"

"Just came for some red paint. I'm making a toboggan and Dad's making a jumper. Neither Mom nor Jane know anything about it. Since the last snow storm we have the grandest hill from the top of the

barn. It's as hard as ice and I bet the sled will go two miles," said Mort enthusiastically.

"It'll be some walk back. You know I saw a sled out here during that last storm, with a sail on it. Was it ever travelling! Perhaps you could rig one on your sled. What's your dad's jumper like—one of those boxes on runners?" asked Johnny.

"Yes," said Mort excitedly, "and he got the blacksmith to make a metal strip for the front. It's real sporty. I can hardly wait till Mom sees it."

Mort smiled as he neared his home late that night. "Good thing I told Dad not to expect me till I got here," he thought. "It must be very late." He could see the light from their own window, first as a tiny pin point; then, as he came nearer, the light stretched out across the snow to meet him. He felt a warm happiness within as he pictured his father and mother sitting reading by that same light.

Touching Pinto's flank lightly he urged him to greater speed. He gave a wild Indian whoop as he neared the house. The saddle-bag was heavy. He dismounted, took the heavy bag and giving Pinto a smart slap headed him for the stable, while he turned towards the house. Mort saw the worry lines disappear from his mother's face as he tossed a brown paper parcel onto the table and stood grinning at her, but the saddle bag he left in the lean-to.

"Where on earth have you been, Mort?" she asked. "It's nine o'clock."

"Sorry I'm so late, Mom, but open the parcel."

She watched Mort intently as she felt the brown paper parcel carefully before opening it. Then slowly, a puzzled expression on her face, she unwrapped a plump chicken. "Morton Currie, where did you get this bird?" she asked, her tone severe.

Mort laughed at her. "I bought it," he answered triumphantly.

"You can't buy chicken in Regina, in the year 1882, for a song." His mother was not to be put off.

"Well, I know that, or I wouldn't have been so late getting home. Pinto and I worked for Mowatt Brothers until after eight o'clock, delivering parcels. They're sure making money these days."

"Have you had any supper?" asked his mother.

"I ate my lunch for supper. Johnny took me to lunch at noon. Oh, I must get Pinto in the stable." Mort was through the door on his way out when he stuck his head in and announced, "Johnny's coming for Christmas dinner." Then he was gone.

When Mort returned a steaming hot plate of buffalo stew, mashed potatoes and turnips was waiting for him. He glanced from his mother to his dad and was satisfied that there was going to be no trouble over his invitation.

"Well, son, anything new in the big town?" asked his father speaking for the first time.

"There sure is. We have our first official postmaster. You won't have to run all around from one store to another wondering which one happens to have the mail box this time."

"Who is our first official postmaster?" asked his mother.

"A man by the name of Irvine, Joseph C. Irvine, arrived from the East this month. And that's not all," Mort answered, speaking with his mouth full.

"What else?" inquired Mr. Currie, the laughter lines deepening around his kindly grey eyes.

"Let the child finish his meal in peace. He can't eat and talk at the same time."

"Seems to be doing fairly well at it," his father retorted.

"Well, first, and of course most important, the Mounted Police Headquarters have been moved to Regina. Johnny will be there at least part of the time. Then, on the thirteenth of this month, the first baby

girl was born in Regina. They've named her Regina Mary Rowell."

"Well, that is interesting," said his mother, a dreamy far away look in her eyes. "The first white child to be born in these parts. That should make history."

"Any further news?" inquired his father.

"Some time ago the big-wigs in town had a dinner party for the Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, I guess it was, and somebody suggested that Nicholas Flood Davin, start a paper in Regina. Mr. Davin took the suggestion seriously and beginning the first of the year he's going to start a paper." Mort rose and began clearing up the table. "What about some apples, Mom?" he asked.

"A very good idea, Mort. And where is our paper? Did you forget the mail?" she continued.

"Oh, gosh, I forgot all about the mail. It's in the saddle-bag. I'll get it."

Mort soon emerged from the back shed with a letter for his mother from their neighbor back East, a couple of business letters for his father and a fat letter for himself from the pal left behind in Ontario. Gosh, it would be swell if Jim could come to visit him next summer.

He paused in his reflections to watch his mother brush away a tear as she read her letter. "Bob, Marion Johnson says they will miss us terribly this Christmas. It won't seem like Christmas at all without us. I wish I had gotten my parcel for her away sooner."

"Your parcel!" exclaimed Bob. "What ever did you send her?"

Mrs. Currie blushed, "I sent her a jar of my saskatoon jam. Mort made me a little wooden box and we packed it well with paper and prairie grass."

Bob laughed. "I'm sure it'll carry all right but you may be giving a false impression of the country."

"Why so? You know perfectly well that saskatoons are native to the prairie," she answered hotly.

"True, but the Johnsons may get the idea that this is a fruit growing country," answered her husband.

"Perhaps that might be a good idea. I wonder if the Johnsons will ever take the notion to come west? It would be nice to have them on the other side of us."

"You never can tell." Bob smiled reminiscently as he puffed at the old black pipe.

"Hurry up and finish reading your letter so that we can have the rest of our story. I believe this is the last installment," Mort said as he placed a bowl of rosy apples in the centre of the table.

Soon he was munching an apple as he lay in his bunk listening to his mother's voice and to the wind whistling round the corners of the cabin. The wind had no terrors for the boy. For the moment his world, warmth and love and comfort and dreams, was shut within those four walls.

His dreams could carry him beyond the present into the future, to the time when he should tame this wilderness and make it bring forth its abundance. Mort never doubted but that great cities, shining turrets and busy factories would dot these plains, but tonight he was a boy listening to his mother's voice bringing their story to a happy conclusion. He wriggled with satisfaction.

"Mom, does it say what the next one is going to be?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes," his mother answered. "Beginning in the next issue...and now to bed."

CHAPTER XIV

CHRISTMAS ON THE PRAIRIE

Christmas Day, 1882, was a crisp, crackling, glittering day. The sun, with its two sundogs, so large that their draperies almost met to encircle the sun, climbed a pale sky. There was no wind and the smoke made a straight, gray ribbon rising up and up until lost in the ether. Many intricate patterns had been traced by nature's brush in the thick frost covering the window panes. There were trees, churches with high steeples, birds and strange animals among these patterns. The hinges, too, were covered with white frost that snapped and creaked as the door opened. But the Curries had built well and there were no cracks to let in the cold air.

Mort and his father, bundled in woolens so that only nose and eyes were exposed, went out to feed the stock and clean the barn. Wi-ya-ka seemed to dance over the hard snow as he flew back and forth from barn to field with his load of fertilizer.

Meanwhile, mother was busy in the house making preparations for dinner. When the chickens were safely in the oven and the plum pudding was bubbling in the big tin steamer, Mrs. Currie came out to enjoy the beauty of the day and to help Mort in filling the two big barrels with snow. He used the axe to cut the blocks of pure white snow that made the best drinking water in the world. There was nothing to mar its pureness, except the smoke from their own chimney.

While he worked Mort kept glancing off in the direction of town. Finally his mind was set at rest. He could see a rider headed their way.

"He's coming, Mom," the boy shouted.

"Then it's time that I went in to see about the dinner," answered his mother, straightening her aching

back. "This is our first real party on the prairie, Mort. It must be a good one."

"It will be, Mom. I know you," answered the boy proudly.

He dropped axe and shovel and went round the corner of the house to greet his friend. Together they went to the barn to put away the horse and were not seen again until called for dinner.

The pleasant aroma of roast chicken, stuffing and the spicy odor of plum pudding greeted Mort and Johnny as they entered the shack. The Masons, dressed in their best, had already arrived. Jane was indignant that Mort had preferred to remain in the barn with Johnny to being at the house to greet her.

"I had a Christmas present for you and now I'm not going to give it to you," she threatened, tossing her auburn curls.

"Oh, Jane, you wouldn't be mean. I have a present for us, you and me," Mort told her. "Johnny and I were working on it. If there's time we could go out and see it before dinner."

"There's plenty of time, Mort. Take Jane out and show her the present while we get the plates filled. Only don't forget that dinner is ready," added his mother.

Jane was thrilled with the bright red sled. It was long and slender with the sides built up like a box. Johnny had helped Mort rig a gunny sack sail for it. The two children dragged it out and to the top of the barn where they let it go. Mort was steering and Jane had a long pole with which to temper its speed, if necessary. They both laughed as the cold air bit into their faces. However, they remembered Mrs. Currie's warning not to keep the dinner waiting, so the real thrill had to wait until later.

"Now, do you like our present, Jane?" Mort asked as they made their way to the house.

"I sure do and I will give you your present Mother sent to Uncle Dick back home for it."

Mort smiled at the small face with its happy shining eyes. "That was very good of your mother; but Jane, why do you still say back home?"

Jane giggled, "I don't know. I guess I never thought of it. After all I lived in the east much longer than I've lived here. This is to new to be called Home."

"But this is where you're going to live. You'll live the rest of your life here."

"How do you know? Perhaps I'll go to college in the East. Perhaps I'll marry a missionary and go to live in China. Anyway I want my dinner now."

"There you go again. Always thinking about eating."

"Race you," cried Jane getting a head start.

The dinner was all it promised to be. Roast chicken and black currant jelly, mashed potatoes, turnips and pickled beets, plum pudding and brown sauce, with plenty of homemade bread and butter. Johnny produced some candies and nuts. As the men pushed back from the table and reached for their pipes, Sam Mason heaved a satisfied sigh as he pronounced, "I bet you never tasted a better dinner than that, in Ontario."

"And most of it was produced on our own farm," added Bob. "Like the Cratchits, we haven't eaten it all."

After dinner Jane gave Mort his present. She stood watching him, her eyes growing larger and brighter every moment and her face twitching in time with his fumbling fingers as he removed the wrappings.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mort, "A book!" His eyes grew wide and he hugged it to his chest without even looking at the title.

"Aren't you going to tell us what it is?" his mother asked.

Then Mort looked at the title. "In Times Of Peril -A Tale of India, by George Alfred Henty," he read aloud.

"The Henty books are excellent boys' stories," Mrs. Mason volunteered. "This one was just published last year. Dick says he's sure Mort will enjoy it."

"I know I will. Thank you very much."

Taking the book, Mort curled up in a corner of his bunk and, unmindful of all around him, even Johnny, was prepared to spend the rest of the day.

"Mort, the book will keep and you have company," his mother reminded him.

"Let's try out the new ship on runners. I'll have to be getting back soon," Johnny told them. The whole party went out to view the launching of the new boat and each had a ride in turn, even Mother and Mrs. Mason. They all pronounced it a fine job and had a real thrill as the wind carried the craft lightly over the frozen snow.



In full sail.

Mort and Bob disappeared in the midst of the confusion. In a few moments they reappeared around the corner of the barn pulling the bright red jumper behind them. Every person in turn admired it.

"Now," declared Mother, "We will be able to drive into town to church."

The sun was low in the west when Johnny announced it was time he was getting back. They waved him good-bye as his bay cantered off in the direction of town. The grown-ups made their way back to the house and the children, left alone, turned once more to their new plaything.

They both climbed aboard and turning the craft so that the wind caught the sail full, they shouted and laughed aloud as the graceful ship slid over the hard surface. The recent blizzard had packed the snow so hard that there was no danger of running into drifts. The wind had freshened and was blowing a gale and their light craft sped at a speed far beyond their reckoning.

The whiteness of the world around them was deceiving. Their eyes had become accustomed to the dimming light and before they realized what was happening darkness had descended upon them. Mort lowered the sail and brought the sled to a stop. In the gathering gloom there was not an object visible—just one great white sea.

"Oh, Mort, are we lost?" asked Jane.

"Of course, we're not lost. We can go back the way we came." Mort spoke sharply to cover his own anxiety. He got down and examined the ground but there was not a mark on the hard surface.

The night was clear and snappy. Jane looked about her. "Mort, it's beautiful," she said in an awed voice. "The sky seems so far away and look, Mort, that one star is rocking on the tip of the new moon."

Mort grunted.

The little girl stood very still studying the stars. Very softly she began to hum and then to sing, "Silent

Night." Soon Mort joined her. They smiled at each other as they noticed how the sound seemed to go on and on forever.

The two children, lost on this vast expanse of white prairie, tried to sing the carol but the frost caught their breath and choked off the song.

"Too bad, I thought we'd be the first to sing that carol to the prairie stars," Jane complained.

"We'd better forget about singing and get started home," Mort retorted.

They turned into the biting gale. "If there was any loose snow we'd certainly have a blizzard," Mort told Jane. "You sit on the sleigh and turn you back to the wind. I'll pull you."

"Do you know where to go?" asked the little girl anxiously.

"The wind brought us here, didn't it? If we face into the wind we must be going back, mustn't we?"

"But what if the wind changed?" argued Jane.

"Well, it hasn't changed. And if you haven't anything better to talk about, just keep quiet."

For moments there was no sound save the scraping of the runners on the hard snow. Mort, with the rope around his waist, head lowered against the wind, trudged bravely on. Suddenly a long drawn-out wail split the prairie quiet.

"What's that, Mort?" Jane's voice was shaky.

"What do you think it is?" Mort snapped.

Jane was very quiet for some time. Then, "Mort, I guess this is an adventure—a real adventure. I'm a fairy princess and you're a knight in shining armor, rescuing me," she giggled.

"What's so funny?" asked Mort.

"Your armor isn't very shiny," answered the little girl.

"It is, too. Can't you see it's all sparkly." All at once Mort stopped dead. He pushed his cap off

his ears and listened. "Did you hear anything?" he asked Jane.

But Jane, bundled up on the sleigh, couldn't have heard a thunder-clap. She shook her head. Mort began plodding again but only for a few seconds. He stopped, cupped his mouth with his hands and let out a war whoop. Then listened. His voice trailed off as the coyote's wail had done. Then complete stillness.

It seemed to Mort that he had been walking for hours when the sky was lit by a bright flare. It was a little to the right of his path but still a long way off. "Oh, no," thought Mort. "No, it can't be, not our home burning on Christmas night. Or is it the barn? That would mean the stock would be lost." He forgot his weariness. His pace quickened to a run.

Jane lifted her head and her voice. "My knight's... Mort, what's that?" she shouted.

"I don't know. Looks as if we were headed in the right direction anyway." Mort tried to make his voice sound bright.

"I bet they've lit a fire to guide us. Why, Mort, this is just like a fairy tale."

Mort grinned. "Let's hope it has a happy ending," he said. Then he heard that noise again. He stopped to listen. He could tell now it was a voice calling. There was no time between the calls. Again he tried to answer. They were getting closer. There seemed to be a moving light as well as the flare. The moving light was high as if a star had lost its way and was wandering between heaven and earth.

Jane had climbed off the sled and was walking beside him but for once she was not talking. "Mort, that's someone on horseback with a lantern," she cried.

Mort grinned at her. "Looks like it might be."

The voice was coming closer now. They could make out the words. "Mort, Mort, come to the light. Come to the light." There was no pause between calls.

The children stood still and lifted their voices in one mighty scream, but there was no use in the calling, "Mort! Mort! come to the light! come to the light!" They were sure the searchers had not heard them and that they would save their breath for running.

There appeared to be two stars now and they were standing still. The calling had stopped. The children took advantage of the lull to lift up their voices again. This time they were rewarded. The small lights made a circle. Then came Bob's voice again, "Come to the light."

Jane and Mort looked at each other. At a nod from Mort, both voices rose on the night air, "Coming." With that, they started to run. It would appear that joy gave wings to their feet. Jane was fresh and had no difficulty in keeping up with Mort.

The two fathers, on horseback, each carrying a lantern, were coming to meet them. Mr. Currie dismounted and handed Jane up to her dad, who hugged the little girl to him until she wriggled to be free.

"You two sealliwags will be the death of us yet."

"We weren't lost," Mort tried to assure them. "We were coming in the right direction. Well, nearly right," he finished lamely.

"You try and convince your mother of that," answered Bob. "Why didn't you answer when we called?" he continued.

Mort laughed. "You didn't give us a chance. We screamed our heads off but you never stopped to listen."

His father grinned. "Perhaps you're right. Climb up here. We'd better get home."

Mort climbed up behind his dad and they started home dragging the sled behind them. Sam and Jane were following on Star, Mr. Mason's own mount. As they neared the house they saw the smouldering remains of the fire.

"Burning all my precious wood," grumbled Bob.

A cry of joy went up from the mothers as the door slowly opened and two woe-begone figures shuffled into the room. There were round, white patches about the size of fifty-cent pieces on each cheek and their noses were badly frost-bitten. Mrs. Currie sponged the frost bites lightly with coal oil. Supper was on the table but no one had eaten. The grown-ups had no thought for food while the two children were lost. Now they heard the children's story as they sat about the warm room picking the chicken bones.

The warmth and the food were too much for Jane and Mort. Their heads began to droop and their eyes just wouldn't stay open. The Mason family decided it was time to go home. Mrs. Mason took her hostess' hand in both of hers as she said, "Maggie, I shall never forget my first Christmas on the prairie."

"I don't believe any of us will forget this Christmas," Mrs. Currie replied as she put her arm lightly across Mort's shoulders.

Mort smiled at Jane and whispered, "I know I won't."

Jane gave him a sleepy grin as she said, "Good-night, Sir Knight."

The Curries stood in the doorway and watched their neighbors, lighted lantern in hand, make their way across the snow, to home.

As he closed the door, Bob turned to his son. "Mort, that sled is safely put away in the barn and there it stays until further notice."

Mort gasped but he was too weary to protest. "Yes, Dad," he replied meekly.

CHAPTER XV

SPRING ESCAPADE

Winter was slipping by. The family enjoyed the leisurely days and the long quiet nights. Mort found much time for his beloved books. He had read his new one from cover to cover several times. It gave him a great desire to know more of India, with its millions of people.

Jane joined Mort in his studies. Mrs. Currie made a strict schedule for the children and made them stick rigidly to it. Jane tired long before Mort. Studies ended for the day, they had many happy hours out of doors. During the Christmas excitement the gunny sack parcel Bob had hidden away in the barn had been completely forgotten. One day near the end of January he came in carrying the queer shaped parcel with him, grinning rather sheepishly.

"Oh, Dad," shouted Mort, "you certainly hid that parcel well. Where did you have it anyway?"

His father gave Mort a sheepish grin, "Under the hay. I had no intention of leaving it there though."

Together they untied the leather thongs and found two pairs of Indian snowshoes, beautifully made. "One pair is for Jane," Bob explained.

"That certainly was thoughtful of Little Feather. I hope that we may have a chance to thank him," said mother.

"How could we ever have managed without our Indian friends? I think I'll find Jane and we'll try our snowshoes," said Mort, as he proudly shouldered his new gift. They were to have many a tumble before they mastered the tricky art of snowshoeing but in the end they felt it was worth the effort. Their speed boat came to an untimely end. It had been kept from them



for nearly the month. Just a few days ago the parents had relented and the children were allowed to take it out.

The creek ice had been swept clean by the high winds and Mort was anxious to try out his sail boat on the ice. There was a stiff wind blowing as Jane and Mort headed their craft towards the creek.

"Where are we going this time?" asked Jane, her dimples showing.

"To the creek," answered Mort. "The ice is in grand shape. She'll sure travel."

"We better not get lost this time, or we never will get the boat again."

"Who's going to get lost in broad daylight?" asked Mort scornfully.

"Well, it was daylight when we started out last time."

"Maybe, but it was late afternoon," retorted Mort. They were nearing the creek now and all his attention was needed in guiding the boat down the bank. Jane clapped her mittenened hands and could hardly restrain herself from dancing, as the boat tipped and twisted into position on the ice. Mort straightened out his craft, and all the children had to do was hang on.

"Oh, Mort, this is the best yet," shouted Jane in his ear.

"Sure thing," Mort called back to her.

They must have travelled a mile or more over the smooth surface of the creek. Then it happened. Mort had been talking to Jane and wasn't prepared for the speed at which they were taking a sharp bend in the creek. Before he could turn the sled it had nose dived into a bank of snow and crashed against some stones, splintering the light boards. The children were thrown headlong into the snow bank.

Picking themselves up and shaking the snow from mouth and eyes, they discovered that neither one was hurt. Then they turned to look at the wreck.

Jane began to cry. "Oh, Mort, our lovely sled. It's ruined. Oh, what can we do?" she sobbed.

"Leave it here and walk home. And stop your blubbering. What good do you think that will do you?" he snapped.

Jane brushed the tears away with the back of her mitt. "We will not leave it here, Morton Currie!" She swept past him, snatched up the rope and started up the bank, dragging the wrecked sled behind her, indignation in every line of her sturdy little back. Mort stood glumly watching her and then in spite of himself began to smile.

"Come on, better move a little faster," he teased.

"You keep quiet. Go on home by yourself, see if I care," she flung back at him, her feet slapping the snow hard with each step.

The grin broadened on Mort's face. He came up beside her. "Want any help?" he asked.

"No, you can go home as fast as you like. I can find my way." At that moment a broken board bit into the snow and brought Jane to a standstill. She looked up at Mort not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Then both children began to laugh. Their laughter grew and grew until it floated away over the empty prairie.

Their parents were sympathetic when the children dragged home the wreckage but the glances they exchanged could scarcely be called grief stricken. In fact, Mort almost thought he detected a glint of satisfaction in his mother's eyes.

It was now past the middle of March. The fields that had been so spotlessly white for many months were grey and dirty. The banks were settling and the lumps in the ploughed field were nosing their way to the sunlight. Bob said he would soon be able to get on that ploughing with a harrow to break up the lumps.

One morning, when Mort had Wi-ya-ka hitched to the stoneboat hauling the manure from the barn, he saw a rider coming up the trail. He stood squinting for some time. Then letting out a wild war whoop, he waved his knitted cap and dashed down the path leaving the pony standing.

"Little Bear! Little Bear!" he shouted.

Little Bear brought his pony to a stop beside Mort. For moments the two friends gazed at each other, their eyes saying all that was necessary.

Finally Mort spoke. "Get down, Little Bear. We'll put your pony in the barn. You're going to stay, of course?"

"Came to get you," said Little Bear, speaking for the first time.

"To get me! But why?" exclaimed Mort.

"Going to look for horses. You like spend night or two in bush and live like my people?"

Mort's eyes grew wide and his cheeks took on a darker red. "Golly, would I like it! I'll tell the world I'd like it. Oh, it would be thrilling out there in the woods all night!"

"Your father let you come?" asked the young Indian.

"He will. It'll be Mom," answered Mort a little of the eagerness going out of his face. This was something to be reckoned with. "Anyway, come and put the horse in the barn and we'll find out," he added in his forthright way.

It was agreed that Little Bear was to spend the night with them and leave early in the morning to look for the lost horses. Not until bedtime did his parents finally give their consent for Mort to accompany the Indian in his search.

The next morning was one of those bewitching, smiling mornings, when you're sure there's something thrilling just beyond the next knoll. The sky was

clear and a soft breeze was blowing from the north-east. The boys, with enough lunch for several days packed in their saddle-bags, ground sheets and blankets strapped behind the saddles, Little Bear's hatchet and a supply of matches in their pockets, were just ready to start when Jane bounded over.

"Mort, Mort, where are you going?" she panted.

"Little Bear and I are going to look for some horses. His people have lost some horses. Wandered off in the last blizzard," Mort told her.

"May I come, too? Please let me come, too," she pleaded.

"No, we may be gone for days."

"Well, I can bring blankets, too," she piped, her eyes shining.

Mort glanced at Little Bear in exasperation, then turning to Jane he explained patiently. "But you can't come, Jane. Your father and mother would never let you come with us."

"I could run away."

Mort laughed. "How far do you think you'd get? No, Jane, you'll have to stay this time."

"And there'll be nothing to do. Not a thing," she protested.

Mrs. Currie came and put her arm around the little girl's shoulders saying brightly, "They won't be long, Jane. You and I'll have to do Mort's work until he gets back."

There were no dimples showing in the small, rosy face that watched the two boys ride off to the south. Mort turned in the saddle and waved to the group standing in the yard. There was no response from Jane.

Although it was still March, the sun warmed their bodies and the boys unbuttoned their heavy coats and untied their mufflers. The Indian boy moved out across the uncharted snows with the confidence born of long years of experience. Mort followed unquestioningly.

Little Bear wanted news of their first winter. Had they been comfortable? Had they been afraid of the blizzards? The answer to the first question was, "Yes, they had been very comfortable in their sod house. Second, they had not been afraid of the blizzards." Mort told Little Bear about their Christmas, of his friendship with Johnny, how the Mounted Police headquarters had been moved to Regina, and about their sled and its untimely end.

"Next winter Little Bear will help you make one. We will put steel runners on it. It will not break."

Mort's face glowed. Nothing could please him more than to work with Little Bear.

About eleven the wind began to rise. The boys buttoned their coats and tightened their mufflers. The sky that had been so clear, giving promise of a great day, began to look grey and sinister. Along the horizon on all sides dull, leaden clouds began to roll up towards the zenith where a patch of blue still winked at them.

By noon snow began to fall, first in large plumy flakes, then in gusts driven by the wind that had risen to a gale. The boys had to shout to be heard above its roar. There was no mid-day stop for lunch. Little Bear, anxious to find shelter before night caught up with them, moved on guided now entirely by instinct.

As the storm thickened the temperature dropped. The boys rode with heads lowered to protect their faces from the driving sleet-like snow. At times Mort couldn't see the shadow of his companion's horse. Little Bear stopped and taking a rope fastened it to the pommel of Mort's saddle. Now they knew that they could at least keep together.

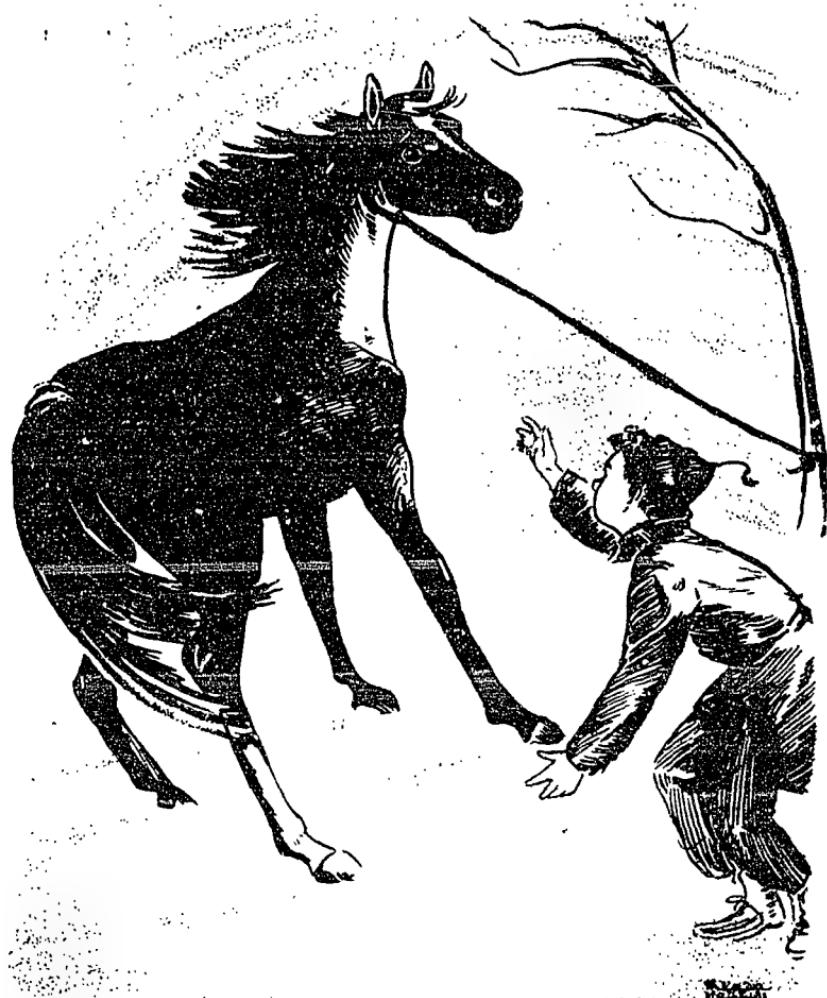
Before dark they stumbled into a small clump of trees. The horses came to a dead stop. The boys dismounted and began at once to clear a path into the centre of the clump. In spite of the biting cold they were soon overheated. Mort could see that Little Bear was an expert at making camp. They scraped the

ground clear of snow which they piled against the trees and drew the tops of the branches in to the centre as well as they could. Then they lit a fire in the middle of the enclosure. The heat melted the snow on the inside of the hut and as the fire died down the moisture froze making a wind proof shelter. They soon had a pail of snow slung over the fire and were reaching for the lunch box. The ponies pushed in and munched their oats, out of reach of the storm.

The warmth of the fire and the long fatiguing ride drove the boys to seek their blankets early. Mort wakened several times during the night. He was quite warm but missed his prairie wool mattress. The frozen ground made a hard bed. Each time he wakened he fed more fuel to the fire.

Mort wakened again as the pale light of dawn tried to push through the grey darkness. He blinked and turned his aching body on his hard bed. Then he came wide awake. The horses had pushed their way into the shelter, but now there were three, their two ponies and with them a beautiful black horse standing with his neck across Wi-ya-ka's back. Mort scarcely breathed. Without making the slightest noise he reached for the rope lying beside his bed. In the same soundless way he inched towards the horse. With a quick, deft movement he tossed the rope over the animal's head. It landed true. Before the horse had a chance to rear, Mort had wound the rope around a stout tree trunk pinning him fast. The black struck out with his front feet and screeched. The pinto lunged out of his path. Little Bear, fully awake now, rolled out of reach of the flying feet. Meanwhile, Mort, breathing heavily, eyes wide and staring, talked softly as in a dream, "Whoa, boy, easy now, whoa, whoa," in a low monotone. He kept this up for a long time until the rhythm of it seemed to fill the little hut. As the animal quieted slightly, the boy began to whistle softly through his teeth, making a low crooning sound.

The black's feet came to rest. He stood, feet apart, head up, nostrils wide, eyes alert, quivering in every muscle. Step by step Mort drew nearer keeping up the soft whistling sound. Slowly the horse's muscles began to relax. The beautiful, slender legs stopped trembling. The boy reached out gentle fingers to touch



Whoa, Boy! Easy now!

the animal's neck. The sensitive flesh drew away from his touch. Now his fingers, scarcely touching, began a gentle stroking under the animal's jaw. In a few moments he was rewarded by the animal lowering his proud head and turning upon him a speculative eye.

The boy was afraid the loud beating of his heart must frighten the sensitive creature. He turned triumphant eyes on Little Bear and held out his hand. The Indian boy understood and came with a handful of oats. With one arm around the horse's neck and his cheek resting on its ebony shoulder Mort had the wild creature eating out of his hand, which at the time was none too steady.

The storm continued all that day. The boys and horses shared the same shelter for another twenty-four hours. Mort and Little Bear took turns, sleeping and remaining on guard. Mort would take no chance of losing his prize.

Next morning the sun rose over a bright world as if nature chuckled over the prank played upon mere man. Mort was to learn that prairie weather played many such tricks today, however, he was far too happy to be put out tricks of the weatherman. It looked as if they were really here this time.

When they came out of their shelter the boys discovered seven horses had taken refuge in their clump of trees. Among them Little Bear found his two strays.

In the bright light Mort discovered that the black was thin. The winter had been long and hard for animals left to fend for themselves.

"Wait until my dad has a chance at you. You'll hardly know yourself," he whispered in the animal's ear.

The boys looked their prize over carefully. He was all black except for a narrow strip on his face and one white foot. His coat was shaggy and there was a lot of loose hair which Mort would soon comb out.

"Will I ever make that coat shine!" he told Little Bear.

The Indian boy nodded. "He is fine horse. Him racer," pronounced Little Bear. "See his slim body and long slender legs. You will have to teach him."

Mort's face was worried. "Will you help me?"

"Some," grunted Little Bear. "One horse, one rider. If you ride him you must teach him."

The sun was low in the west as the two boys proudly rode up to the Currie door. Mort leapt lightly to the ground and led his prize up for his father's inspection. The animal tossed his head as Bob reached out a friendly hand. He was not yet ready to make friends.

"What do you think of him, Dad?" asked Mort his voice quivering with excitement.

"He's a fine horse, Mort, but where did you get him?"

"He strayed into our camp during the storm. He is a wild horse. Doesn't belong to anyone."

"How do you know that he doesn't belong to anyone?" asked his father. "That's a very valuable horse, son. You'll have to make every effort to find the owner before you can claim him as yours."

"Wild horses often stray up from across border. Whoever catches and tames them, keeps them," volunteered Little Bear.

"Supper is waiting," called Mrs. Currie. "The boys must be starving. Let them come and get it, Bob."

When Mort led the black fellow into the barn, he threw his arm around its neck exclaiming, "They can't take you from me, Black Fellow. They can't! They can't! I won't let them."

CHAPTER XVI

HARVEST

Spring had passed into summer and summer was passing, yet no one had come to claim the black fellow. Mort had named him Prince because of the way he carried his head. At his father's command Mort had ridden into town and laid his case before the owner of the local paper.

"So you found a wild horse?" this kindly gentleman had asked him.

"Yes, sir," answered Mort. "My father says I must advertise him so that the owner may have a fair chance to claim him."

"Is he a good horse?" asked the editor.

"Oh, sir, he's a beauty! Little Bear thinks he's a racer. He says people often pick up wild horses in these parts and if you can tame them they're yours."

"Quite right. If you can tame them. Think you can tame this fellow?"

"Yes, sir, he's tame already."

"Well, you're lucky then. I'll run an ad in my paper and if you don't hear from the owner in three months the horse is yours."

Mort laughed when he read the ad. "Found, black gelding, white face, one white foot. Annoying farmers southeast of town." There followed a dissertation on the trouble caused settlers by stray horses and especially stray Indian dogs.

The three months were now more than up but as might be expected no owner had come to claim Prince. Horse and boy were almost inseparable. The black fellow would come at Mort's whistle from the farthest corner of the pasture, which Mort and his father had fenced to keep the animals out of the grain. Under Mort's care the ebony coat began to shine like satin.

The land ploughed last year had been seeded with wheat and they had been able to get a few acres of spring breaking for oats. Continued dry weather throughout the spring and early summer had caused considerable worry. Mr. Currie had insisted that deep seeding was best for wheat in this country and now he was one of the few settlers who had prospects of a fair return for seed planted.

During the long summer days Mort and Jane wandered over the prairie. They found meadow-larks' nests in the fringe of prairie grass. Of all the birds they loved the meadow-lark's song best of all. The children learned to recognize the call of the thrushes, warblers and swallows. They knew the catbird, flycatchers and wax wings. Jane became so expert at imitating the different birds that she often fooled Mort.

The blistering summer days, when heat waves shimmered over the brown prairie grass, held no terrors for Mort. He often wandered for miles snaring gophers. One day in early spring he trapped a badger. He and Little Bear tanned the skin, Indian fashion, into a beautiful, soft pelt that his mother used to trim her coat.

Then in late summer came odd electric storms that broke with terrific fury, lasted but a short time and passed, leaving the country washed clean and at peace. Mort was caught in one of these storms. He had been going the rounds to see how many gophers were in his traps and had wandered some distance from home. He realized that the sun had disappeared but it didn't occur to him to look for the cause until a deafening crash of thunder made him look up. A moment later the sky was ripped open by a second giant fork of light whose huge prongs seemed to reach the earth. Mort blinked and then stood motionless waiting for it to happen again. He didn't have long to wait.

Near the horizon the sky was an inky black which gradually greyed as it extended upwards. Mort thought it looked like some huge, black monster bearing on its back mountains of white foam. He was later to learn that such a cloud meant hail. The storm was travelling rapidly. Then the wind came, not gradually but with a sudden burst. Mort felt his clothes whipped about him and he had to struggle to keep his feet.

The day that had been so hot turned suddenly cold. Mort shivered as he pushed into the wind. The rain started before he reached the house, first in large drops and then the heavens opened and the rain spilled down. Mort was soaked to the skin but what terrified him was the large hail stones which accompanied the rain.

It was the supper hour and the table had been ready for the evening meal. As the storm advanced it had become dark in the little cabin and Mother had placed a lighted lamp in the centre of the table. When Mort opened the door the two windows on the west side of the house crashed in. Wind, rain and hail swept the small room. The lamp, food and dishes were piled on the floor in the farthest corner.

Mort and his mother huddled in a corner until the storm passed to spend its remaining fury on the empty plain. The little home that had been so trim, was a sorry sight. The earthen floor was water soaked. When Bob, who had taken shelter in the barn, reached the house he fastened a ground sheet over the opening until the windows could be repaired. The family spent the night in the lean-to.

The Curries were grateful for the hot summer days that followed the storm. It required days of wind and sun to dry out their little home thoroughly and make the mud floor fit for use. Bob made a trip to town to have the windows repaired. Soon life was back to normal again.

In spite of the busy days mother found time to paint more of the prairie flowers. She did the gentle, furry-coated anemones that nosed through the snow in early April. Then later Jane brought her a bunch of prairie lilies, asking her to please make a picture of them. She did and gave the picture to Jane. There was always a bunch of wild flowers in a bowl in the sod house, buttercups, little white daisies, or marigolds in summer and in fall the golden rod, brown-eyed susans and purple sage.

When the moon, a harvest lantern, hung low over the fields dotted with yellow stooks ready to be hauled in and stacked in the yard and the chill of evening drove the family to seek the warmth of their own fireside, Mort had a feeling of great pride. This was the reward of their labor.

Mort had fun when they finally found time to haul in the sheaves. It was his job to build the loads and the stacks and the work was hard. The sheaves gave him no firm footing and his feet were always slipping. He found, too, that there was a real art to building a stack. Bob insisted that it must be built to shed the rain.

The first row of sheaves was placed in a circle on the ground with the heads to centre. Each succeeding row was placed to overlap like shingles. The centre was made hard and firm and the stack was built to a point. Mort found that he was glad to rest in the empty wagon as the horses lumbered back to the field for another load of sheaves.

Bob and Sam Mason had bought a small horse-powered thresher, between them. One day Bob returned from town in fine spirits. "Have you plenty of food in the house, Maggie?" he asked.

"I can have. We have plenty of potatoes, turnips and carrots in our garden and you never saw such cabbages. They must be as big around as that pail," pointing to a five-gallon water pail.

Bob laughed, "That's fine. You'll be needing them. We're going to start threshing the day after tomorrow."

It was mother's turn to laugh. "You'd think you had the whole hundred and sixty acres in crop," she said.

"We're pretty green at this job. It may take longer than you think," he retorted.

"How many will there be to feed?"

"I'm not sure. Jim Moore is coming out from town to lend a hand. He's looking forward to making it a real picnic. Plenty of stuff for pies?"

"I have rhubarb and I can make some custard pies and one pumpkin may be ready to use."

"Mort, here, can drive the horses," Bob remarked as Mort came in.

"Do we start threshing, Dad?"

"Day after tomorrow, if it doesn't rain."

"It won't," the boy assured him.

The night before threshing was to start, Sam and Bob had the machine drawn up close to the stacks. To Jane it was a funny looking outfit. Mort undertook to explain how it worked. The small platform with the four wooden arms radiating from it was called the horse power, he told her. As this was a small machine it required only eight horses hitched two abreast, to each of the arms, and each team was also tied to the arm ahead. The horses had to be trained to step over a steel tumbling-shaft from the horse-power to a jack, half way between the horse-power and the separator. A rubber belt from the jack to the drive wheel of the separator drove the machine.

"That'll be my job," Mort told her. "I'm going to drive the horses. I'll have to teach them to step over that shaft."

"Mr. Smarty, come over here; I want to see the other part." Jane was tugging at his sleeve. "Is it

called a separator because it separates the wheat from the straw?"

"I suppose so." Mort pointed to a spout. "That's where the wheat comes out. I think they're going to let the wheat run into these boxes and then Dad will haul it on the stone boat and dump it into a bin he has boarded up in the end of the barn."

"Oh, Mort, isn't it wonderful, the first grain on the prairie! What's that big long thing sticking up in the air?"

"That's the straw carrier. There's canvas on that wooden frame. When the machine is running the canvas revolves and carries the straw up and away. Somebody may have to build the stack. That'll be a good job for you, Jane."

"I'd get buried in the straw. I'll drive the horses and you can build the stack."

"You drive the horses! I suppose you think that's girl's work. See that little platform?" he continued, pointing to the machine. "That's where the man stands who feeds the machine. A man on the stack throws the sheaves down on that table; another man stands there, cuts the band and pushes the sheaf in, head first."

Jane climbed up on the platform and tried to see what happened the sheaf after it was pushed into the big mouth.

"See those teeth," Mort said. "They drag it in."

It was now so dark there was little point trying to see more. They would wait until morning.

The day dawned clear and warm. A strange assortment of horses was hitched to the new horse-power, Prince, the ponies, Cap and Deck, the little grey mare, Sam Mason's two heavy horses and Jim Moore's bays. Mort felt very important standing on the little platform cracking his whip and pretending to be very stern. Jane insisted that she be given a chance

to drive. In a short time the outfit had to be stopped while she was lifted down.

"And you thought you could drive. There's nothing to it. Oh, no, nothing to it," scoffed Mort.

"Well, can I help it if I get dizzy?" she retorted.

"What makes you dizzy? I don't get dizzy," Mort countered.

"You haven't any brains to get dizzy," she flung over her shoulder as she made for the house.

Even Mort found it a long day standing on that small platform, cracking the whip and watching the horses' feet go round and round, hour after hour. By supper time he was a little more sympathetic towards Jane.

However, they were long hours for dreaming and Mort loved to dream. It was one of those perfect September days, not infrequent on the prairie, when you can look beyond the purple haze, and if you have an imagination, look into the future. There was a soft hum of insects in the air and the horses lazily switched their tails to drive away the persistent flies.

The sound of the men's voices as they joked with each other, the slow plodding of the oxen drawing the wagons, and the rustle of the sheaves were sweet music to the boy. By mid-afternoon, his mother came out with cookies and tea and they all enjoyed a few minutes relaxation.

That evening as the boy and Jane were chatting before going to bed, Mort pointed to the path made by the horse's feet. "See that path?" he asked.

"Yes, the horses must be tired. I wonder if they were dizzy," said the little girl.

"That's not hard work for horses. They're used to it. It's the path I'm thinking about."

"What are you thinking about it?" Jane looked puzzled.

"That's what we're doing to this land. We're putting our mark on it. Ever since the world began it's been just the same. Snow in winter, green grass in summer, wild animals and Indians, it never changed. Now we're putting our mark on it." He sat with his head resting on his hand, eyes on the purple shadows moving in along the horizon.

Finally, Jane giggled and poked her elbow into his ribs. "Old Mooney, remember me? I'm here."

Mort turned to look at the smiling face beside him. It was tanned a dark mahogany. "That's what I mean, Jane, look at you! You're changed. You're not a little girl any more. You've grown up since you came here last summer."

"What about yourself! Ever try to wear the overalls you travelled in last year?"

"I couldn't. There's nothing left of them. They're in ribbons," laughed Mort. "I say, Jane, when I was in town the other day I heard that the school is going strong. Has been for months."

"Honest!" said Jane, her eyes shining. "Do you think we could go?"

"That's what I'm hoping. As soon as threshing is over. You know that new building of Mr. Bonneau's; that's where the school is being held."

"Let's go and ask if we can go," cried Jane, jumping to her feet and trying to pull Mort up. "Mom and Dad are still in your house."

Mort unwound himself slowly. "I'm not sure this is the right time," he drawled.

"Sure it is. Come on."

They found their parents relaxing after a busy day. Threshing was a community effort. Mrs. Mason had spent the day helping Maggie with the cooking while the men had worked out-of-doors. When the Currie job was finished the outfit would move across the line to the Mason farm and the two women would move with it.

Jane dashed into the room and took them by storm. "Mummy, Daddy, Mort and I want to start to school when the work is finished. You'll let us, won't you?"

"How could you go to school? Winter will soon be here," her father teased.

"Well, we can ride to school in the winter. We're not softies," answered Jane.

"Never a moment's peace will I have if you two start riding back and forth to school," wailed Mrs. Mason.

Mort left Jane to do the coaxing. He walked over and sat down on his bunk watching the grown-ups. The best Jane got was a promise from her parents, to think about it.

CHAPTER XVII

THE SEARCH

Summer seemed reluctant to leave the prairie that year. The mellow days of September stretched through October. The bare brown fields "lazed" in the soft October haze and Bob Currie rejoiced as he watched the long furrows turned to the sun. Each new day meant more furrows ploughed, more land ready for next year's crop.

The little town was growing. During the summer, four streets had been laid out and graded and the population had reached four hundred. Jane and Mort soon learned to avoid those graded streets following a rain. The friendly quality of the mud could be embarrassing, particularly if you left your shoes buried in it. Government House had been built and the North-West Council and the Department of Indian Affairs were now housed in Regina instead of Battleford. Lumber was replacing canvas in the little town.

Jane and Mort rode to Regina every day to attend school. Now the boy was happier than he had ever been. His keen mind reached out beyond the every day tasks assigned by the teacher. His was an insatiable thirst for knowledge, a reaching into the future. Jane on the other hand lived in the present. To her, education was fine if it didn't interfere too much with the pleasure of the moment. She was everybody's friend.

When sudden blizzards came up, as they often did, the children remained in town until the storm was over. Mort often took advantage of these nights to earn a little money delivering parcels, or what he enjoyed most of all, taking charge of the book store while the owner was away.

One night as they were riding home he announced to Jane, "I've earned five dollars."

"Oh, gosh, what are you going to do with so much money? Buy Christmas presents?" asked Jane.

Mort didn't answer immediately. "I'd like to buy a pair of skates. They're talking of opening a rink in town sometime this month."

"Can you skate?" asked Jane in amazement. "You never said you could skate."

"I used to skate in the east. If I had the skates I could practise."

"But where would you skate, on our slide?"

"On fine evenings we could stop at the creek on our way home and skate for an hour. Have you ever skated?"

"No, but I could learn, if Dad would only get me the skates."

"You could work and earn them," grinned Mort.

The following week they both had their skates. Jane had worn down her father's resistance and he had bought her a pair and every fine evening they stopped at the creek to practise. By December eleventh, the date set for the opening of the rink, they had become fairly expert. The rink was one place where Mort could leave Jane behind.

January first, 1884, was warm and balmy, with little or no wind. Although New Year's Day is considered gentlemen's calling day, all the ladies in Regina and surrounding district were received that day at Government House by Governor and Mrs. Dewdney. Mother found the weather too warm for furs and Bob drove all the way to town without his gloves. But during this month the temperature ranged from twenty-five above zero to thirty-five below and the snow was eight inches deep on the level.

Two days later, January 3rd, nominations for the first town council were held and on election day two hundred and thirteen people voted for the town's first mayor. During the year he offered five hundred dollars to build a bridge across Wascana Creek.

True to his word, Little Bear had helped Mort in the construction of a sled with steel runners and a sail and now they had some good times skimming over the crusted surface of the snow.

One Thursday night, late in March, Mort had brought the mail home as usual. It was Thursday that the local paper came off the press and the Currie family looked forward to a pleasant evening with the news. This evening, however, Mort was restless. He had a strange foreboding of coming ill. Finally, unable to listen any longer to his mother's quiet voice, he slipped his feet into his shoes and tiptoed from the room. In the shed he picked up the lantern, lit it and stepped out into the chilly night. The moon had not yet risen and the sky was leaden and grey.

On reaching the barn he was surprised to find the door off the latch. "How could dad have been so careless as to leave the door unfastened?" he thought. When he entered the barn Mort swung the lantern high above his head. Then he clapped his free hand over his mouth to stifle the scream that rose to his lips. A horrible, black face with two wild, red rimmed eyes, was thrust close to his own.

"Don't you make a sound, see. Not a sound, d'ya hear?" the voice hissed.

Mort, who by that time, couldn't have made a sound if he had tried, managed a slight nod. The butts of two Colts caught his attention so that he looked more closely at the man's face. "Tom!" he whispered through chattering teeth.

The black head nodded but the eyes still held Mort's.

"Are you hungry?" asked the boy.

"Starved. Haven't eaten in twenty-four hours. Had to keep out of sight in the daytime."

"I think I could get you some food without anyone knowing and then you'll have to move on."



"Is that so?" sneered the bearded man. "You get me the food and I'll look after when I move on. Don't you let anyone know, remember. Don't let anyone know. Now beat it."

Mort hung the lantern on a peg in the barn and then crept back to the shed. Here he found some cooked meat and bread. With these he scurried back to Tom.

Tom snatched the food from him and began devouring it like some starved animal. Meanwhile, Mort watched him with a half frightened, half pitying look in his wide staring eyes.

"Where did you come from, Tom?" the boy ventured.

"From nowhere. They're after me. I'm trying to make the border. My horse, *Midnight*, you remember her, broke her leg. I had to shoot her."

"Oh, no, Tom, you didn't shoot *Midnight*!" gasped Mort.

"Had to. Now I have to foot it to the border. I'm going to sleep in this barn tonight and I'll be out of here 'fore anyone is up in the morning. If ever you let on you saw me I'll let you have it," he continued pointing to the two Colts.

"I won't tell, Tom, but why don't you stop living as you do and go straight? You could get a homestead. See what a nice place we have here."

"And work like your dad does? No, sir, not for me. Even in my wanderings I hear about the Currie place. I can make a living easier than that."

Mort didn't say anything but thought his father was a lot happier doing it his way.

"Get back to the house before they come looking for you," growled Tom.

His voice and manner were still gruff but Mort noticed that the deep lines in Tom's face had relaxed a little since he had eaten and there was a faint indication of a twinkle showing in his eyes.

"Goodnight, Tom, I hope you can keep warm. The nights are still cold." Mort wished he could ask Tom to the house for the night.

"I'll be warm. Beat it."

On entering the house Mort tried to look as if nothing unusual had happened. He didn't know that trouble was plainly written on his face.

Bob looked up from his paper and studied the white, drawn face. "Anything wrong, son?" he asked after a moment.

"No, Dad, nothing wrong."

Bob let the paper lie idle on his knee as he leaned back in his apple-barrel rocker. His right elbow rested on the arm of the chair, and his hand cupped the bowl of his pipe.

"Prince all right?" he asked.

"Yes, Prince is all right." Mort felt relieved that the question was so easily answered.

"Then to bed," ordered his father.

Mort was glad of an excuse to turn his face to the wall and pretend to sleep.

Long after his father and mother had gone to bed, Mort lay wide-eyed staring at the ceiling. Without making a sound, he raised himself on his elbow and peered through the window above his bed. The wind had risen during the night and had scattered the leaden clouds. Now a full moon rode the heavens making the country-side almost as light as day. As he gazed the long drawn out wail of the coyotes rose to a crescendo. The boy shivered.

Next morning Mort was up and out before his parents wakened. He found the barn door open. Tom was gone; so was Prince.

The boy was stunned. He stood rooted, his brain refusing to believe the evidence of his eyes. Then he moved as a sleep walker, hung the lantern on its peg and moved into the empty stall. He let his hand slide along the rough pole at the top of the manger. As if the

contact with its roughness brought him out of his stupor he turned and ran from the barn calling, "Prince, Prince." He gave the low soft whistle that always brought the horse, even from the farthest corner of the field. Nothing happened. Then he looked for footprints. But he knew before he looked that no footprints would show of the hard crust of the snow. He scuttled along the ground, bending low, hoping to find some clue and ever and anon giving his clear call for Prince.

Mort had gone much farther than he realized, when he became conscious of another sound. Someone was calling him. He came back on the run and met his dad at the barn door.

"Dad," he shouted, "Dad, Prince is gone."

"How can Prince be gone? Do you mean you didn't fasten the door last night?"

"I fastened the door all right, but he's gone I tell you, he's gone. I've got to get the pinto and go after him."

"Listen, Mort, if you fastened the door, Prince didn't unfasten it. Now tell me what happened last night." His father paused. "Was Tom here?"

Mort looked startled and then hung his head as the red crept slowly up to his hair line.

"I heard in town that he had been seen in these parts again. You should have told me last night. That was the time," added his father.

"No, Dad, no, he had the two guns. He'd shot Midnight. Midnight had broken her leg. Oh, Dad, he looked awful. The Mounties are after him." The words tumbled over one another. "Now I must go after Prince."

"No, Mort, you can't go after Prince. Tom has no doubt ridden all night. You'd never overtake him."

"Dad, I have to find Prince." Mort was desperate and his white face was twitching.

"What about your friends, the Mounties?"

For a fleeting instant light broke in Mort's eyes and then went out like a candle. "No, I can't do that. They'd take Tom."

"But, Mort, Tom is breaking the law. He's peddling whisky. If he hadn't lost *Midnight* he'd now be safely over the border. Perhaps he is anyway; Prince can certainly travel. It's no good, son; he'll just come back again. You can't save Tom. He'll keep on breaking the law."

"Oh, if he only hadn't taken Prince."

"He was breaking the law without taking Prince and you can't protect people who persist in breaking the law."

Father and son were standing in the yard, heedless of the cold March wind of early morning. Bob looked down into the white face of his son. Mort's eyes full of pleading, looked to his dad to solve this problem as he had solved so many in the past. Suddenly the boy's expression changed. It was as if some inner voice had spoken. This time it's different. You're on your own. He withdrew into the barn and kept his own counsel.

"Better go in and get some breakfast. You've been out a long time," said Bob following Mort into the barn.

The boy went without protest. The shorts porridge, his favorite winter breakfast, was boiling on the stove. Its pungent odor filled the warm room. His mother smiled. "You may have your breakfast now," she said. "You've been out a long time in the cold. This porridge will warm you. You needn't wait for your father."

This suited Mort's plan perfectly. Ordinarily, the thick porridge, with rich milk, would have pleased him. This morning his only concern was to eat a big breakfast. Boiled egg, toast and warm milk followed.

Mort had finished eating and was about to take the calf's milk to the barn when Bob came in. Bob

stuck his finger into the milk to be sure the temperature was right. He nodded his approval.

"You can take this pan of warm mash at the same time, can't you?" asked his mother.

"Sure," Mort replied.

He scattered the mash for the chickens and then held the bucket while the calf drank. Mort was sure no calf ever took so long to drink a pail of milk.

"Keep your nose in that pail and drink," he growled glancing impatiently towards the house. There was no sign of movement. Finally the bucket was empty and the calf raised his dripping nose and looked to Mort for approbation but Mort took no notice. He placed the empty pan in the mouth of the pail and left them near the door.

Taking a pencil and paper from his pocket he wrote a hurried note, which he nailed to the post behind Daisy. When Dad comes out to clean the barn he'll be sure to find the note, thought Mort.

Now with the speed of born necessity, he snatched the saddle and bridle from their pegs and threw them on Pinto. With sure, deft fingers he drew the girths tight and adjusted the stirrups. Then moving softly on moccasined feet he led Wi-ya-ka to the far side of the barn. Here he held his breath and listened. Not a sound came from the direction of the house. Mort sprang to the pony's back and lying low, dug his heels into its flanks and the pinto leaped forward. The steel shoes rang out on the frozen snow.

As the sun climbed higher its warm rays began to penetrate Mort's frozen body. His spirits rose with the temperature. There was hope in action. Tom had a long start but still he would have to rest somewhere. He just had to find Prince. The pinto seemed to be sharing Mort's anxiety. He never travelled better. The small feet scarcely touched the ground, as the great white emptiness slipped by.

The sun that warmed Mort also made the going more difficult, and it wasn't long before the game little beast had to slaken his pace. Mort leaned forward and stroked his steaming neck. "I'm sorry, old fellow, but you want to find Prince, too, I know you do." The little animal's head bobbed up and down as if in an affirmative.

"I suppose it was roads like this," thought Mort, "that cost Midnight her life." With the thought came a long shudder that shook Mort's body.

"Hurry, Wi-ya-ka, please hurry; be true to your name; fly as light and swift as a feather borne on the wind. We've got to find Prince before something happens to him." Mort had become almost as expert as Little Bear in charting his course. He had been travelling almost due south; now he began to lean to the west. Since the Mounties had been moved from Fort Walsh to Maple Creek he felt that Tom would not avoid that crossing.

If Mort's mind had been at rest he would have enjoyed this ride on his own. The iron hand of winter was relaxing its hold on the prairie. Soon these fields, which looked so drab and uninviting, would be clothed in a soft green. He loved the beauty of spring, when the murmur of running water, the bird songs, the croaking of the frogs and later the myriads of flowers all spoke so eloquently of the richness of the land.

This morning he could only think of Prince. Would he be in time? When the sun was high, Mort dismounted and rubbed pinto down and cooled him off before giving him the oats, which he had not neglected to put in the saddle-bag, and letting him drink from the pools of clear water. He had not thought of bringing food for himself.

They were soon on their lonesome way again. Hour after weary hour, the patient little pony plodded on. When the chill of the evening was creeping into the air something like panic gripped Mort. Perhaps his father

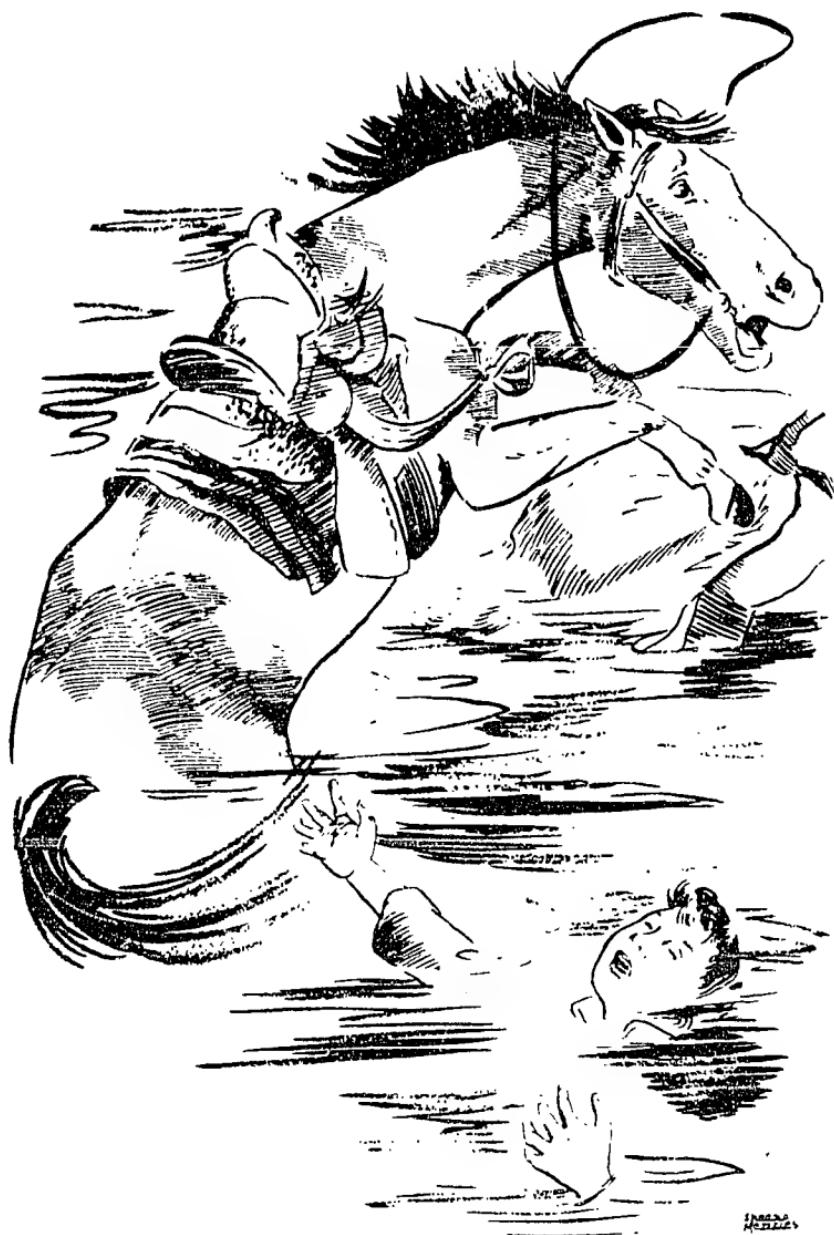
had been right after all and he should have notified the Mounties.

That night he slept in a straw stack near a little shack. The wind rose during the night and the ground was covered with a hard granular snow by morning. The owner, a bachelor, found Mort, fed him and Wi-ya-ka and sent them on their way with food, pemmican and biscuits to last for several days.

Mort's hopes rose with the sun. Today he would find Prince, he was sure.

It was growing dusk on the third day out, when he drew pinto to a halt beside a small river. The ice had not yet broken up but there were places where the water showed plainly over the ice. Should he try it? He couldn't come all this way only to lose. He had to cross that river. He'd take it easy and let Pinto pick his steps.

The pony stepped gingerly out onto the river ice. "Come on, old fellow; you can do it. That's fine. Come on, Wi-ya-ka; keep going." They were just about midstream when the pony's feet broke through the ice. He plunged and Mort slid off. He dropped the reins and grabbed for the horse's tail, caught it but at the next plunge his hands slipped. Mort felt the icy waters close over his head.



Mort felt the icy waters close over his head.

CHAPTER XVIII

TO THE RESCUE

Mort stirred. He tried to move but was all tight; something seemed to be holding him. Then he realized that he was moving. He could hear a sound like runners scratching on a hard surface. What had happened? Where was he? He tried hard to remember. The water, that was it, he was in the water. Could he be in the bottom of the creek? It was dark enough down here. But the water had been cold. Now he was hot. He felt as if he were in a vapor bath.

Someone was speaking. "You awake back there?"

"I... I guess so. Where... Where am I?"

"In the bottom of a sleighbox wrapped up in buffalo robes."

"They're mighty tight. I can't move."

"You were soaked to the skin. Didn't want you to catch a cold."

"What happened?" asked Mort, trying his best to wriggle and loosen the robes.

"That's what I was about to ask you. I found a pony and no rider. Looked around a bit and found you bobbing in the water, head and shoulders caught on the ice. What were you trying to do?"

"The pony!" exclaimed Mort. "Was the pony all right? Where is he now?"

"One at a time, youngun. Yes, the pony's all right, coming along beside us."

At that moment Mort heard a sharp whinny. "Wi-ya-ka. Wi-ya-ka." The boy's voice trembled.

After a short silence Mort asked, "Who are you and how did you happen to be here?"

"Name's Watson. Own a place a mile north of here. I guess you'll have to bunk with me for a day or two."

"Did you happen to see a man, a big man with black hair and black whiskers? He was riding a fine black horse."

"No, can't say that I did."

Mort lay still. He was very hot and uncomfortable but at the moment his mind was giving him more trouble than his body. He had failed. He would never see Prince again. Why hadn't he taken his father's advice!

The sleigh came to a halt now and his new friend helped him into the house. When the cold air struck Mort he started to shake. Mr. Watson helped him into the house, gave him a good rub-down and soon had him in a long flannel nightgown and tucked into bed. When his host returned from attending to the horses the boy appeared to be asleep....

After Mort had left the house on Friday morning with the calf's milk, Bob had relaxed for his morning's pipe before beginning the day's work. The pipe finished he rose, emptied the ashes into the stove and tucked the pipe in his vest pocket.

"Seems awfully quiet around here," he said.

"That's what I was thinking. Mort didn't bring back the bucket. It isn't like him to leave his chores half finished," replied Mrs. Currie.

Bob struggled into his sheepskin coat and heavy mitts. "Maybe he's currying the horses and has forgotten the time. I've never seen a youngster so fond of animals."

"I'm glad he is. Keeps him happy in this lonely place."

Her husband looked at her sharply. "You're not lonely, are you, Maggie?" he asked.

"Not really. It's almost a case of all work and no play though. The horses are great company for Mort. He's growing so strong and healthy. Hasn't had any of the children's diseases."

"No one to carry germs." Bob grinned at her as he went out.

Mrs. Currie had just finished clearing up when he was back. He stood looking at her, a piece of white paper in his hand.

Maggie didn't need to read the note. "He's gone, isn't he?" she asked.

Bob nodded. "I've never known Mort to deliberately disobey me before," he said as if talking to himself.

"He had to find Prince. Oh, Bob, what will he do? He'll never overtake Tom," her voice broke.

"I told him distinctly he was not to go. He had no right to disobey me."

"Except the right of every human being to save the thing he loves," Maggie replied sharply.

"There's only one thing for me to do. I must ride to Regina for the police. The sooner that fellow's locked up the better."

"You're right, Bob. Hurry!" Maggie was twisting her hands underneath her print apron.

"I don't like to leave you alone. No telling when I'll be back," said Bob, his face lined with trouble.

"I'll be all right. Nothing will happen to me; only hurry and go after Mort."

Mrs. Currie's housekeeping didn't take much of her time but her fingers were never idle. She knitted socks, stockings, mitts, mufflers, toques and sweaters to keep her family warm. Today she worked feverishly at a quilt. When the light began to fade she fed and watered the stock, milked the cow and fed the calf. She was sorry when there was no further excuse for working.

The sky had clouded and night closed in early. With the coming of night the wind rose and a fine sleet peppered the window panes. All the long night the lamp sent its faint yellow rays across the frozen snow; all night a fire was kept burning in the stove in case

her men should come home cold and hungry. The morning dawned bleak and cold. A hard, icy crust covered the ground and the wind still moaned around the corners of the house. That afternoon a rider approached and Maggie's heart leaped. She ran to meet him. It was Little Bear. When he heard the news he set out at once taking the same route. Mort had taken Maggie's confidence was revived. Little Bear could find Mort.

A week was to drag its dreary hours by before Maggie saw any sign of the travellers. She was standing at the window looking off towards the horizon. Many hours during the last seven days she had spent staring just that. This time she thought she could see a speck moving in the distance. Yes. She was sure now that something was moving against the skyline. She ran to the fire, hoping that when she returned the speck would be nearer. She could see now a rider, a team and sleigh.

She pressed her hands hard against her breast to still the beating of her heart. "Oh, God, it's got to be! It's just got to be!" she murmured.

Heedless of the weather, she ran outside waiting in the yard for them to come up. The rider waved to her and galloped ahead. It was Bob. He wanted to be first with the news.

As the sleigh came to a stop, Mrs. Currie recognized Johnny Stuart and nodded to him. She peered over the side. There was Mort almost hidden in a pile of buffalo robes. He tried to smile at her but to his disgust his mouth trembled.

"Mamma, I didn't...I didn't find him." His voice trailed off.

"But we will. We'll find him. Little Bear's gone to look for Prince."

Mort's face brightened and then clouded again. "He's nowhere to be found. I'll never see him again."

Bob carried Mort into the house and placed him on his own bunk. When the men were warmed and fed and Johnny had started back to town, Bob told his story. He had ridden in to Regina and consulted the Mounted Police. They sent Johnny Stuart with a team and sleigh and Bob had ridden his own mount as he felt a horse and rider might get through where a sleigh could not. They had started south from Regina. Had been slightly west of Mort's route. For three days they travelled without finding any trace of Mort. The next morning they saw a settler's cabin and stopped to ask for information. There they found Mort in bed with quite a temperature.

Johnny gave him a slight sedative (Mounties had to be doctors, too, sometimes). Mort became less restless and after a time slept. Bob sat beside him far into the night. Next day the temperature was down but Mort was impatient for news of Prince. To please him, Bob and Johnny had scouted around for any sign of the missing animal but had learned nothing.

"When we were satisfied the danger of pneumonia had passed, we brought him home. That's the story. I had no way of letting you know that we were all right."

"I certainly didn't feel the cold air with all those buffalo robes wrapped around me," volunteered Mort.

Mort's recovery was slow. He would lie gazing into space, neither reading nor talking, for hours at a time. One Saturday afternoon Jane came home from a visit with Mort. She stood in the kitchen, her face quivering, twisting her apron into a tight little ball.

"Jane, you're going to tear that apron. What is it, darling?" asked her mother. Jane dived into her mother's arms, buried her face on her shoulder and burst into tears. Her mother held the little girl close until her grief was spent and then she asked, "What is it, Jane?"



Johnny gave him a sedative.

"It's Mort, Mummy. He's going to die; that's what he's going to do! He just lies there and gets thinner and whiter every day. Why doesn't someone do something?"

Mrs. Mason shook her head, "That's what I wonder, too."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'll do. When I get my eyes on Tom I'll shoot him. That's what I'll do. I'll shoot him..." She wiped the tears from her eyes and nose, with the back of her hand and sniffed.

Her mother struggled not to laugh as she looked at the woebegone little girl. "We'll have to find some other way, I'm afraid. We just don't shoot people, Jane, even when we're very angry with them. I made some crispy doughnuts today. You take some over to Mort. I'm sure he'd like them."

"No thank you, Mummy, he wouldn't eat them," she said with a long drawn out sigh as she walked across the room and climbed up on her bunk.

Mrs. Mason stood in the middle of the room and watched the little girl. Then with an impatient shake of her head she returned to her work.

Next morning, Sunday, April twenty-seventh, Bob went out to the barn alone, to do the chores, as he had been doing for the last month. His steps were slow and his shoulders stooped slightly.

He had been gone but a few minutes when he was back. Both Mort and his mother looked up in surprise. Bob stood looking down at his son with a strange expression in his kindly eyes. He looked from one to the other but volunteered no further information. It was what Mort used to call his "Guess What Look."

"Bob, what have you been up to? What has happened?" asked mother. "Did... Did..." Mrs. Currie stammered.

Bob still grinning at his son nodded, "Yes, Prince is tied in his own stall in the barn."

Mort's eyes grew wider and wider until they were too big for his face. He tried to speak but no sound came.

"Think you can walk to the barn, son?" asked his dad.

Then Mort's voice came. "Dad, he came home. He came home. He came back to me. He came back by himself. Dad, does he look all right?"

"He looks fine. Coat just as shiny as when he left. But Mort, Prince couldn't tie himself in the barn."

"Perhaps Little Bear brought him back," suggested mother.

Mort studied her face for a moment before speaking. Then he said slowly, as if thinking through a problem, "No, Mother, Little Bear didn't bring Prince back. Little Bear wouldn't leave like that. He would have come in."

The boy slipped his bare feet into his felt boots. His hands fumbled as he tried to wrap the old flannel bathrobe around him. His body was frail but his face was radiant. He staggered as he attempted to run to the door. Both parents watched him but neither interfered. Bob blew his nose hard and mother wiped her eyes on her apron.

Half an hour later, when Bob went out to the barn, he found Mort sitting on the top pole of the manger, his feet in the hay. One arm was around Prince's neck and the boy's face rested on the shiny satin shoulder. Both boy and horse appeared perfectly happy.

That night Mort ate Jane's doughnuts and he and Jane had a long visit.

The following Tuesday afternoon Little Bear arrived at the farm. Mort was overjoyed to see him. "Gosh, it's good to see you. It's been so long." After a pause, in which Little Bear volunteered no information, Mort asked, "Were you able to find any clue as to what had happened to Prince?"

The Indian boy shook his head. The two boys were sitting on Mort's bunk.

"Do you know who brought him home and tied him in the barn?"

This time Little Bear nodded.

"Who?" asked Mort leaning forward eagerly his hand on Little Bear's knee.

Little Bear didn't move but looked steadily into Mort's eyes. "Tom did," he grunted.

"I knew it was Tom. Oh, I'm so glad." Mort's face was shining.

Little Bear got up to leave. "You're so glad," he mimicked, as he moved noiselessly towards the door. With his hand on the latch Little Bear turned and faced Mort.

"The police have Tom. Got him when he came back with Prince." The door opened and closed. Little Bear was gone.

CHAPTER XIX

REGINA'S FIRST FAIR

With the return of Prince, Mort's recovery was rapid. In a short time he was able to take his place in the regular life on the farm. At fifteen the boy was almost as tall as his father, slim of waist and broad of shoulder. His eyes had lost none of the eager light with which they had looked out on the prairie that first day, now so far away.

Mort did not return to school that spring and it was with wistful eye that he watched Jane ride off each morning. Now that seeding time was upon them his help was much needed at home. The Curries had one hundred acres ready for crop this summer of '84. Bob was justly proud of the accomplishment.

One night while relaxing over his evening pipe he took out pencil and paper and spent some time studying before announcing to the family, "We should soon be able to apply for our patent."

"Then this land will indeed be ours," said Maggie.

"Yes," continued Bob, "when we made application for a homestead we were told we must break ten acres the first year. The second year we were to crop the ten acres broken the first year and break fifteen more. By the end of three years we must have forty acres, or one quarter of our land, under cultivation." He looked from Maggie to Mort with a satisfied smile.

"And this year we will have a hundred acres in crop," Mort cut in.

"Pretty good, eh, son." Bob watched his son for a few minutes, then continued, "Now that seeding is finished, I think I'd better sink that well. If this summer proves as dry as last we may be in a bad way for water. Little Bear is sure there's a spring in that corner of the pasture."

Mother leaned forward eagerly, "Bob, I've been thinking that I'd like to have you build a milk-house down by the well. It's so hard to keep milk sweet."

"What have you in mind for a milk-house?" asked Bob.

"A house built around the well nice and roomy, where I could keep the milk cans; do the churning and store the butter. The water is ice cold. We could even hang the cans in the well."

Bob smiled. "Build it of sods?" he asked.

She nodded, "And get lumber for shelves and a door. We'd have to padlock it, of course."

"Sounds like a good idea, I'll think about it. Mort you can drive the team tomorrow. No time like the present. I think I'll start on the well first thing in the morning."

Bob brought lumber from town for cribbing for the new well. The digging was not too difficult at first. Then Bob came to a strata of rock-like substance through which he had to chop his way. The going was slow. This was followed by sandy soil. The water began to flow. Bob was worried when he went to bed that night. He had hoped to get down much deeper; now he was afraid the supply of water would not be sufficient.

Next morning Sam Mason suggested that he sink a pipe. "Now that you've struck that sand a pipe should work."

Bob took his advice and to his amazement found he had a continuous flow of water.

One evening near the end of September Jane came over to see Mort as he drove the team in from the field. "Mort, there's no fun going to school when you're not there. When are you going to start again?"

"Not till the work's finished, I'm afraid. I'll soon catch up." He grinned at her.

"Are you never going to town again? You haven't been to town since before you lost Prince."

"I don't know when I can get away from here. We're very busy."

"Well, you'd better plan to come soon. There's going to be big doings," Jane teased.

"What's doing?" asked Mort.

"Regina's going to have its first fair early in October. You'll have to come to that."

"Oh, we'll all go to the fair. Jane have you seen anything of Johnny?" Mort looked worried.

Jane shook her head. "No, Mort; there's something going on that I don't understand."

Jane settled herself on the wagon tongue and watched Mort remove the harness from the horses and give them a slap to start them off towards the ravine for a drink. The overflow from the new well meant plenty of water in the ravine.

Mort sat down on an empty nail keg and said, "Now, what's on your mind?"

"I don't know how to tell you. Johnny's not in Regina any more. He and twenty other Mounties have been sent north to Prince Albert, I believe. There are more dark-skinned men in town; people call them half-breeds. They wear big black hats, buckskin suits, red kerchiefs round their necks and bright sashes at their waists."

Mort grinned, "I suppose there's no law against them. They can come to town and dress as they please."

"You haven't seen how they swagger." Jane got up and gave a demonstration of a half-breed walking into a store in Regina. Mort laughed and Jane, her small nose twitching, continued. "People are worried."

"What do they say? What do people say?" asked Mort.

"They don't say anything to me. I just overhear some things. They're talking of an uprising. Two names I hear often—Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel."

"You don't mean these men have been in Regina though?" queried Mort.

Jane gave her head an impatient shake. "No, people are just whispering. It seems this man Dumont was a great hunter and a fine leader among the Indians and the half-breeds. They'll follow him anywhere."

"Have you seen anything of Little Bear?" asked Mort, as he looked at her with troubled eyes. Since the day Little Bear walked out of the house after telling him about Tom, Mort had neither seen nor heard from him.

Again Jane shook her head. She was gazing off past the ploughed fields towards the pasture. At that moment Prince was standing head up, as if in expectation. Mort followed the direction of Jane's glance and seeing him, gave a soft whistle. It was what the animal had been waiting for. Prince gave an answering whinny, tossed his head and came in at a gallop, his long mane flowing in the wind.

Mort and Jane went to meet him. Jane stroked the soft nose and rested her cheek against his face.

"Mort," she spoke softly, "I want you to ride Prince into town soon. Tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I'll have to find out. Why?"

"You know they have a race track down by the creek?"

"Yes," Mort nodded.

"A breed, on a huge buckskin racer, is often seen swaggering about town these days. He claims his horse can't be beaten. I want to show him that Prince can beat his buckskin."

"Perhaps he can't." Mort laughed. "If there's any truth in what you say it mightn't be a good idea to beat him."

Mort didn't manage the trip to town until the day of the big fair. His mother and dad drove in the buckboard, but he rode Prince. In town he visited his old haunts. The first place he went was the headquarters of the Mounted Police, hoping to hear or see something

of Johnny. He was just crossing the grounds when a voice hailed him. "Hi, kid."

Mort stopped dead. He knew that voice and his heart missed a beat. "Tom!" he gasped as he turned sharply. "Where did you come from? What are you doing here?"

"One at a time, kid." Tom sauntered over to Mort and stood leaning on the fork which he had been using to pitch hay. "You're surprised, eh. How the mighty have fallen. Never thought you'd find Tom working for the Mounties, did ya?"

Mort was bewildered and a little troubled. "I'm sorry, Tom. But...but...?"

"You got Prince? He's all right?" asked Tom.

"Yes, Prince is fine, but Tom, how could you do it? Steal him, I mean."

"I never really meant to steal him. I was desperate. I had to get over the border, or thought I had. I was going to turn him loose to come home, but somehow I got fond of the critter and hated to let him go."

"Then why did you bring him back?"

"Oh, decided he wasn't up to much." Mort detected a twinkle in the dark eyes under their heavy black brows. "Heard a rumor you were eating your heart out, so thought I'd better get him back. You was sick, wasn't you?"

"Yes, I was. Couldn't you get back across the border?"

"Fat chance I had. No horse, and the red coats scouring the country. To tell the truth the game was up. My partner, a white collar kid, vamoosed with the loot while I was risking my neck for more. I didn't have enough money to buy a horse. So I decided I'd let the Government keep me for a while. Now I earn my grub by pitching hay for the Mounties. Guess you'd better vamoose; I've got to get to work. They keep an eye on me here."

"Tom, come out to the farm and see us. Mom and Dad would like to have you."

"Sure, sure, I'll do that." Tom returned to his work.

Mort had been so busy with his own problems that he had paid little heed to what was happening in town. He went now to look for Jane.

As he moved through the town he discovered the place was swarming with Indians, their teepees and wagons over-ran the small place. Among them were a number of half-breeds in their gay kerchiefs and bright sashes. Everyone appeared in holiday mood. Mort saw nothing to justify Jane's fears.

He found the family much interested in the exhibits at the Fair, which were numerous and of great variety. He and Jane visited the live stock section first. Here they found horses, cattle and pigs from the neighboring farms. Jane assured Mort that none of the horses could equal Prince in appearance and she was sure they couldn't touch him for speed.

Other exhibits included grains, and vegetables of remarkable quality and size. "Look at this turnip, Jane," cried Mort. "I bet it's a yard around."

"You're crazy. How could a turnip be a yard around? Gosh, maybe it is!" exclaimed Jane as she saw the turnip Mort had indicated. "Measure it, Mort. There's a line." Jane pointed to a measuring line lying on the counter. "Someone else must have had the same idea."

"I wasn't far out. Look at that," cried Mort. "Thirty-three inches. Will you believe me now?"

Mother was interested in the women's section. There she found a number of paintings, some in oil, others in water color. There was also a little china painting. Mort was sorry she hadn't entered her roses. He still liked them the best.

They found the Indian section had the best potatoes. There were exhibits from the different Indian

schools. A prize was given for the best Indian boys' band, for the best kept house on a reserve. The government officials were to report the winner later, after an inspection of their housekeeping could be made. Prizes were also given for the best bread and butter made on a reserve.

Later in the afternoon the Curries followed the crowd gathering to watch a ball game between Moose Jaw and Regina. There was a stiff wind blowing and the October air was cold, so Hudson's Bay blankets were distributed to the crowd. Moose Jaw carried off the honors in the game.

While they were watching the game Jane pulled Mort's sleeve and whispered, "There he is, see, behind the home plate."

"What on earth are you talking about? See who?" asked Mort.

"The breed who owns the buckskin—see—the one with the scar on his face." Jane took no further interest in the ball game.

"Let's go and get the horses, Mort," she urged.

"Are you ready to go home?" asked Mort amazed.

"Oh, stupid, who said anything about going home? Come on. I want a ride."

Mort rose reluctantly and followed Jane to the livery stable where they had left Brownie and Prince. He suddenly stopped and looked at Jane. "Say, what's the idea? Are you thinking about that race?"

Jane grinned and blinked at him. "Smart boy."

"Are you crazy? That breed is watching the ball game, hasn't any idea of racing anybody," retorted Mort. "You cook up the silliest ideas." Nevertheless Mort continued towards the barn.

They saddled their mounts and rode off to have a look at the track. Before long the horses were cantering around the track to the evident enjoyment of both riders. Jane pulled her pony to a halt. "He's coming," she whispered.



"The owner of the buckskin?" asked Mort without turning his head to look.

"Yes," Jane's eyes were wide with excitement.

A smile appeared in Mort's eyes and spread slowly over his face. "Come, let's try it again." He indicated the track by a jerk of his head. The two horses were running neck and neck until Mort slapped Prince lightly on the flank and he shot ahead.

As they crossed the finishing line the breed came up. He was a large, dark fellow and the sear made an angry line across his left cheek.

"Fine horse you got there, youngster," he said as he came up to Mort.

"I think so," replied Mort pleased with the compliment to Prince.

"Can he run?"

"A little."

"Ever try racing him?"

"No, sir, not really. Jane and I fool around a bit."

"Like to try?"

Mort hesitated while Jane could scarcely restrain herself. "Might try," answered the boy slowly.

"Winner takes both horses," suggested the breed.

"No," Mort spoke quickly. "I'll not run on those terms."

The breed scowled and his face looked dark and sinister. Mort thought the sear looked particularly ugly when he was angry. "All right. Win or lose you keep your own horse."

Mort, a little uneasy, looked at Jane. "You heard that?"

She nodded. "Yes, Mort, I heard. Win or lose, you keep your own horse."

"The track is a half mile long and we go around three times," suggested the stranger.

Mort agreed. They drew up at the starting line, Prince on the outside and Jane was to give the signal

with her quirt. The horses danced; the riders waited, leaning slightly forward as Jane's hand paused for a second in the air. Then with a sudden jerk the whip came down. Both horses leaped forward. The buckskin was a powerful brute and might win, Mort felt, if this were an endurance test. But Princee was the real racer. His feet seemed scarcely to touch the earth. Mort was not urging him. On the first round the buckskin crossed the line half a lengt' ahead.

Jane shouted, "Come on, Princee! Come on, Princee!" Brownie danced and strained at the bit. A fair sized crowd had gathered, mostly Indians and half-breeds, and were looking on with evident enjoyment. On the second round Princee had made a slight gain.

Now Mort leaned low on the black's neck and made a strange hissing close to the animal's ear. The horse's body appeared to lengthen. The flying feet reached farther. In a moment now he would pass his opponent. Mort didn't breathe. They were approaching the last curve.

A horrible thought flashed through Mort's mind. The buckskin wasn't going to make the curve. He was making straight for the creek. Panic seized Mort. He couldn't stop. They would collide. He jerked in the saddle - gave a wrench on the right rein - Princee took the leap. He landed on the other side of the creek. The sensitive creature stood breathing heavily, nostrils wide, quivering in every muscle. Mort's breath escaped in a loud hiss. He patted the horse's neck and spoke softly to quiet him. Jane joined him but the breed rode off without comment.

"That was a dirty trick," stormed Jane. "But I'm glad you showed him."

"I didn't show him anything. I didn't beat him."

That night Bob looked grave as he listened to their story. "You'd better see that Princee is in the barn tonight—and lock the door," he added.

Chapter XX

WAR CLOUDS

The year 1885 was ushered into a world of untold beauty, a world clad in purest white and lit by the magic of a full moon. During the early hours the thermometer stood at fifty-eight degrees below zero. There was no wind and in the keen clear air sound travelled endlessly.

On his way to the barn Mort stood for a time taking in the beauty of the landscape. Gosh, he thought, there's no horizon. My vision just goes on and on. There's nothing to stop it.

Shortly after breakfast the temperature rose considerably and with it the wind. By noon it had reached blizzard velocity and a gale of fifty-five miles per hour lashed across the prairie. Even though it was New Year's Day, there was little calling done in Regina and surrounding district. The Curries, very comfortable by their own fireside, were thankful they had plenty of fuel in the shed and fodder in the barn. A week later there was a heavy shower of rain and sleet in the morning but the weather cleared by noon and the rest of the day was warm and fine.

There were few days during the winter when Jane and Mort were unable to attend school. Sometimes they hitched the pony to the jumper and drove into town. They were much warmer in the jumper but if the weather was fit they both preferred to ride.

One evening near the middle of March, Bob Currie sat in his favorite chair, the old barrel rocker, smoking. He had made a trip to town for supplies and to get the team shod. Now he sat quietly smoking...too quietly.

"Dad, haven't you any news for us?" asked mother after waiting patiently for Bob to volunteer something.

"Humph," grunted Bob, giving his head that backward toss that Mort knew so well. He was silent again for some time studying his son's head bowed over the paper.

"Saw your friend and his buckskin. I think you'd be wise if you continued to keep Prince under lock and key," he remarked.

"He hasn't any idea where Prince belongs," answered Mort looking up.

"I wouldn't be too sure." There followed another long pause.

Finally mother looked up from the sock she was knitting. "Bob, you needn't be so secretive. There's something worrying you. Why don't you tell us what it is?"

Bob smiled at her. "You may not like what I have to tell you. There's trouble coming in the North, I believe."

Mort dropped the paper and sat up. "Where?" he asked, his voice tense.

"Rumor has it that a rebellion is unavoidable. There will be a detachment of police sent north from Regina. I promised to drive a transport. This outfit will no doubt head for Prince Albert."

Mort jumped to his feet, hands clenched, eyes blazing. "You can't do that, Dad, you can't do it." The boy brought his clenched fist down hard on the board table.

Bob straightened in his chair and took his pipe from his mouth. Then speaking very slowly in measured tones he said, "Mort, sit down. When you can control yourself, perhaps we can talk."

Mort sat down; the knuckles of his hands still showed white. His gaze dropped to the floor.

Bob relaxed. "You don't know what you're talking about, Mort. This is something that has to be done."

Maggie's knitting had fallen from her hands and her eyes were troubled. "Bob, did you have to offer to drive a transport?" she asked gently.

"No, I suppose I didn't have to, but men and teams are needed. The people in those northern settlements are our people and they need our protection."

"But Dad, Little Bear, Little Feather, they're our friends. You can't go out and fight them. Just think of all the Indians have done to help us."

"I know, son, that's true and it's to be hoped there will be no fighting, and, even if there is, the Indians may not become involved. Anyway it's not the Indians, it's the half-breeds who are causing the trouble. The Indians may not come into the picture at all."

"Why did the half-breeds leave Manitoba and move west anyway?" asked mother.

"The very troubles they were running away from in Manitoba are catching up with them here," answered Bob.

"And what's that?" asked Mort irritated.

"The French half-breeds are voyageurs. They took up their land in narrow strips with water frontage. Now the government surveyors are moving in and surveying the land in square blocks. The breeds feel that they are losing their property and their living."

"Why can't they go to the government? What are governments for? Couldn't the officials make the half-breeds understand that no one is going to take their land from them?" asked Mort.

"The Indian agent has tried and it seems that the breeds appealed to the government, but Ottawa is a long way from Batoche, where the half-breeds have established their headquarters. No, the men in the East are too far away to know the real trouble," sighed Bob. "The rumor is that the breeds have set up a provisional government at Batoche and are refusing to recognize any other. They're finished with Ottawa, they say."

"I still don't see why we should interfere," mumbled Mort.

"If your mother was in danger and there were people who could help, but wouldn't, how would you feel? Did you know that Johnny and twenty other Mounties left some time ago for the North?"

Mort's brow was deeply furrowed. Things just didn't make sense. His dream wasn't coming true, and in some way, which he couldn't understand, it appeared to be the white man's fault.

"But, Bob, how can you go?" asked mother almost as mystified as Mort.

"I told the commissioner that I couldn't be away long. They are badly in need of teams and men to drive them. It will be some time before we can get on the land so I thought, that in the meantime, I could give them a hand. You and Mort can carry on here, can't you, son?"

"Yes, we can carry on; that's not what's worrying me. I can't understand how you can go out and kill our friends. Little Bear and I swore to befriend each other."

"The transports will be carrying ammunition and supplies to the white settlers around Battleford, Prince Albert and other northern forts. I will be doing no fighting, so even if your friends are drawn into this struggle, I will not be fighting them." For some time the silence in the little house was audible.

Finally Bob continued, "The breeds are really in a bad way. They used to make a good living trucking freight. Some breeds had a real caravan that travelled the old trapper's trail to the north, but with the coming of the railway they've lost their means of livelihood."

"Is it true that Riel is in this country?" asked mother.

"Yes, the breeds at Batoche sent for him. Thought he was the one man who could lead them," said Bob.

"But I thought he was outlawed following the Red River Rebellion," mother reminded him.

"He was. But he's here now. The breeds are getting excited over what they feel is another grievance. Riel is pointing out to them that their cousins, the Indians, are being well taken care of. They are settled on reserves. They are supplied with farm machinery, teachers are sent among them, and when food runs short they are supplied from the government stores, but the government has done nothing of this for the half-breeds."

"Is that the truth?" asked mother.

Bob shrugged, "Looks a bit that way."

"And in spite of all that, you're taking sides against the breeds," said Mort getting up from his bunk. He walked out of the house without waiting for a reply.

Once outside he gazed up at the heavens. The night sounds whispered about him as if trying to still the tumult in his soul. What was this thing that was threatening their peace and security? He moved slowly towards the barn his eyes still searching the heavens, where the Milky Way made a pathway to the stars.

Some time later his father found him sitting on the manger in front of Prince his arm lying easily on the horse's neck. He neither moved nor spoke when his father came in.

Bob stood silent gazing, at his son; then he tried a smile. "I'm sorry, Mort, I didn't expect you to take it so hard, but I can appreciate your feelings." Bob made a place for himself on the pole beside Mort. The soft animal sounds along broke the silence.

"Isn't there any other way?" asked the boy finally. "Little Bear and Little Feather have been so good to us. They took us in and made us part of their way of life. I know the breeds will try to persuade the Indians to come in on their side."

"You're right," his father agreed. "But this trouble may not come to real fighting and bloodshed. There's less danger of bloodshed if our people are prepared to defend themselves. Anyway, Big Bear, chief of the Plain Crees, has promised to keep his people out of this dispute."

"If we're taken away their freighting business by building the railway and the settlers are driving away the wild game, why doesn't the government settle the half-breeds on farms and help them get a start?" Mort asked. "Help the breeds as much as they're helping the Indians?"

"I don't believe the breeds want to settle down. They call themselves free men. They want to roam the country, to fish, to trap and trade their surplus goods to the Hudson's Bay Company for ammunition and clothing. They want this country for the Metis (half-breeds). As far back as 1816 two half-breeds, Cuthbert Grant and Peter Pangman, employed by the North West Company, agitated for control of the prairie. The main cause for each of the uprisings has been this desire for nationhood. They're proud of their blood and their deeds, and look upon themselves as a separate race. To them we're intruders."

"Perhaps we are. Perhaps we should go back and leave this land to the Indians and the half-breeds." Mort looked at his father out of eyes, heavy with trouble.

"Go in to bed, Mort. We're here now and we'll have to make the best of it."

Mort slid from his perch and, following his father's advice, went to the house and to bed.

The days that followed were busy ones at the farm. A change seemed to have come over the little household. Where there had been friendly, intimate conversation, there was now a withdrawing, each person keeping his own counsel. Sam Mason and Bob were often seen in deep conversation out-of-doors, but when by his own



fireside Bob would sit with his old pipe in his mouth, neither reading nor talking.

On the morning of March the eighteenth, the Curries had breakfast by lamplight. Bob had to be in Regina before six o'clock. A messenger had ridden out the day before to tell Bob that the detachment would be leaving Regina in the morning. On March sixteenth, Commissioner Irvine of the North West Mounted Police, at Regina, had received word from Ottawa, to proceed north at once, with all available men. Bob gave last minute instructions as to work on the farm as he ate his breakfast.

"I won't be long," he told them, assuming an air of cheerfulness. "The commissioner knows my help can only be temporary."

"A lot you can do about that," his wife retorted. "Your going may have been your own choice. Your returning will be theirs."

Mort asked permission to accompany his father to Regina. It was agreed he should ride Prince into town and see the cavalcade get under way.

The commissioner's detachment consisted of four officers, eighty-six non-commissioned officers and men, and sixty-six horses, about thirty transports and four men with each transport. Mort discovered to his surprise and delight that Tom was to ride in his father's sleigh. There would be little sign of civilization as they moved north. A few mail shacks were scattered along the route, and they would have the telegraph poles as a guide.

The weather was bitterly cold, the temperature well below zero as the party started off. Some of the police were mounted; others rode in sleighs. Mort waved them good-bye, then walked Prince a short distance along the trail. With a heavy heart he watched the line wind and twist over the uneven surface of the snow. They were going out into high adventure and he was being left behind. Slowly he turned his horse towards home.

CHAPTER XXI

ADVENTURES IN THE NORTH

Bob waved to Mort as he saw that the boy had stopped and was standing by the trail watching the line disappearing in the distance.

That first day the brigade stopped at Pie-a-pot's reserve for lunch, then proceeded along the Qu'Appelle to Misquopetong's place, a distance of forty-three miles from Regina. The next morning reveille sounded at three-thirty and the column was on the march by five. Tom was in a bad mood.

"This is worse than rum running," he grumbled. "I guess I'm in the army now, even if I only ride in a bob-sleigh and carry no firearms."

The fourth night out they made their own camp and the men were forced to sleep in the sleighs with the temperature still forty below zero.

"Boy, oh boy, she's going down tonight." The words shivered between Tom's chattering teeth.

"Yes, good thing our load is mostly hay, even if it is baled. We can make an igloo out of hay," Bob suggested.

"If I'm an icicle in the morning don't bother to thaw me out," Tom drawled.

When reveille sounded next morning Bob stretched his cramped body and exclaimed, "By jove, I believe I'm hot."

On reaching Humboldt, where they intended to camp that night, they met two friendly breeds, who told the commissioner, "You must not go by Batoche. Four hundred breeds are waiting for you. You will not see them. They have dug deep pits and are waiting to shoot your men as you try to cross the river."

The order was given, "Fall in. We will continue to Hoodoo (Indian name for mail station), six or seven

miles further. There are supplies at that station which we can make use of."

They were in enemy territory now. Shortly after leaving Humboldt they received word that Riel's men had sacked Hoodoo. When they reached the mail station they found that their information was only too true. Nothing in the way of supplies had been left.

Shortly after starting next morning Tom remarked, "There's something ahead that doesn't belong to our outfit."

"I've been noticing that, too," Bob replied without removing his gaze from the moving objects.

"See, the scouts are surrounding them," Tom continued.

The column slowed to a halt.

"I'm going up to see what's happening. Pick me up as you pass." Tom slid to the ground.

After a few moments the objects ahead had fallen in with the police column and all were moving. As Tom climbed back up the side of the load he was chuckling. "These sleighs are loaded with the loot from Hoodoo. Now we have the supplies without the trouble of freighting. Very thoughtful of Riel, I'd say."

"We could lose that freight, you know. We're not far from the crossing at Batoche," Bob remarked.

"Yep," answered Tom. "Orders are if your team is shot at the crossing get them out of the way fast. Mustn't block the traffic. What I want to know is if they get us first, how can we move the team?"

"You're supposed to dodge the bullets. Looks as if the scouts up ahead are turning to the right. That means we by-pass Batoche and go by Prince Albert. You know..."

Tom never did know what Bob was about to say for while he was speaking the sleigh gave a terrific lurch and the horses stopped in their tracks.

"Now what?" asked Tom.

"I'd say a broken runner," answered Bob.

The line piled up behind them. Men and horses hoisted the crippled sleigh to the side of the road. "Think you can manage?" asked one of the men.

"Yes, we can manage," Bob assured them. "We'll overtake you."

In the meantime Tom was foraging for food. He came up with a couple of tins of pemmican and boxes of biscuits. "Let's eat," he suggested as he watched the sleighs moving away.

"We can't stop to eat. It's no small task to unload this sleigh and reload it to say nothing of mending the runner."

The runner was not broken but the steel had been torn from the wood. There were a few tools and pieces of board in their outfit, so the two men set to work. It was dark by the time the job was finished. Huddled in the shelter of the bales of hay they ate frozen pemmican, which they scooped out of the tins with their jack-knives and they sucked snow for liquid to wash it down.

Tom looked at Bob and started to laugh. "I heard the commissioner say he'd be in Fort Carlton on the twenty-fifth; that's tomorrow. Since the detachment has gone by Prince Albert he can't possibly be in Carlton tomorrow but we could."

"You don't mean . . . ?" Bob hesitated.

"By jove, I do mean, let's go by Batoche. We have to travel all night anyway, why not slip by those breeds. Now that the police have passed they won't be expecting anyone and will be nursing their wounded pride by their own firesides—we hope. We could be in Carlton in the morning."

Bob laughed. "It's worth a try, but if we don't get through don't blame me."

They were alone and without protection so they drove nonchalantly along holding to the open road. However the two men breathed more easily when they had passed Batoche unchallenged. From here Bob

followed the trail that bent slightly to the north. Throughout the night the horses plodded on; the men dozed. With the greying dawn they could see something taking shape in the distance.

"That must be Fort Carlton," Bob nodded to indicate the object in the distance.

Tom came to, blinked and shifted his cramped body. "Do you suppose that they know how to make coffee in that place?" he asked.

"We'll soon find out. We're almost there."

As they approached the fort the men could see that the buildings were enclosed by a barricade of cord-wood. Bob climbed down and limped to the main gate where he banged loudly. A small dark man opened it for him.

"Morning, stranger," he greeted Bob. "You're about early."

"Travelled all night. We're part of Commissioner Irvine's brigade. Stripped a runner and were left behind on the trail."

"Can't be much behind. I'm quite sure the Commissioner hasn't arrived yet, but then I've just driven in."

"Oh?" Bob queried.

"I'm a breed but I don't hold with what the breeds are doing. I've just brought in a good supply of ammunition from Mitchell's store at Duck Lake. Riel and Gabriel Dumont are both at Duck Lake but they never suspected that under that hay was a load of the ammunition they were hoping to seize."

Bob turned and grinned at Tom. "Now we know why we were able to pass Batoche so easily. The leaders, for the present at least, have moved out."

They had breakfast with the breed and he told them a little of the beginnings of the rebellion. Early in 1885, Lawrence Clark, of the Hudson's Bay Company, visited Ottawa to get what he called justice for the half-breeds. Clark, angered because he felt that the

government had not taken his request seriously, told the breeds on his return, "The only help you will get will be bullets, and the police are coming to arrest your leaders."

Bob looked grave. "I suppose Clark had no idea how his message would affect the breeds. What about the Indians?" he asked.

"That remains to be seen. Riel is supposed to have sent runners among the Indians telling them to kill the white men. So far the Indians have been fairly quiet. The first big mistake the breeds made was when they brought Riel back from the United States," the breed continued.

After breakfast our friends wandered about the fort for a time. Then deciding that they had nothing better to do than catch up on some lost sleep, they made a bed in their own sleigh and slept for twenty-four hours. There was great excitement next day, when they were about again. Crozier's men had started out for Mitchell's store, at Duck Lake, to bring in more ammunition and supplies that might otherwise fall into the hands of the rebels. Near the lake they had been halted by a number of rebels, among them Gabriel Dumont, their military leader. A skirmish ensued which lasted forty minutes.

The rebels were protected by woods and the police were in the open. Crozier's men were forced to retreat and late that afternoon the police returned to the fort with ten men killed and thirteen wounded, having been driven back by over three hundred rebels.

While the fighting was taking place near Duck Lake the Regina detachment arrived at Fort Carlton.

"Where have you fellows been?" asked one of the drivers when he saw Bob.

"We arrived on the twenty-fifth as scheduled," Bob answered.

"Fine thing! We almost went back to look for you."

"Most considerate of you. But you didn't go back, did you? We arrived safely anyway, more than twenty-four hours ahead of you."

When the commissioner heard about the lost battle with the rebels he decided that Carlton would have to be abandoned and they would concentrate their forces at Prince Albert as the rebels would most certainly follow up this victory by an attack on Carlton. They planned to take all provisions with them but at two o'clock in the morning, before loading was completed, the cry of "Fire, fire," startled the workers.

The fire had broken out over the main gateway, the only exit for teams in the temporary stockade of cord-wood. Men dropped their work. Teams were hurriedly hitched. Logging chains were thrown around sections of the cord-wood and the teams hauled it out of place. In the matter of minutes openings were made in the fence large enough for the teams and sleighs to pass out into the open. Meanwhile flames soared into the sky. The fort became a blazing torch—beacon to the enemy. After two hours of desperate work the fire was under control, the wounded had been made as comfortable as possible in the sleighs and the party was on its way to Prince Albert.

On reaching Prince Albert, Bob asked permission to travel through the country as a free lance scout. In compliance with his own request he was allowed to go unarmed. He was given a good horse and told, "If you lose this one you'll be able to pick up another in your wanderings. There are many stray horses in the country, some of them our own, some of them belonging to settlers whose homes have been burned by the rebels."

Bob soon learned that the victory for the rebels at Duck Lake had had startling effects. The terrified white settlers had left their homes to seek the shelter of the forts, while the Indians, surprised and excited at this unexpected power in their hands, sent the news

by signal fires all over the country. The Red Coats of the Great White Mother had been defeated. The Indians and their cousins were no longer in fear of the police who had commanded in the North. At Frog Lake, two hundred miles up the Saskatchewan, the Indians had the news within twenty-four hours.

Bob didn't know much about this far northern port except that it was a Hudson's Bay Trading Post and he knew that the Indians had great respect for the employees of the company. Perhaps that might save the small hamlet.

One day, as Bob sat by a small stream eating his pemmican and drinking the cool water, a breed with a rifle slung over his arm, rode up and dismounted.

"What you doing here?" scowled the breed.

"Sit down, friend, and have some meat." Bob greeted the man good naturedly.

"Where you going?"

"I'm on my way to Frog Lake to see a friend of mine."

"What's your friend's name?"

Bob had to think fast. "Cameron." He had heard some one speak of a man by the name of Cameron at Frog Lake. "Works for the Hudson's Bay Company, I think."

"You friend of Cameron's?" The breed dropped to the ground beside Bob placing his rifle within easy reach and accepted the pemmican Bob handed him.

After a moment's silence the breed spoke again. "No one left at Frog Lake. Cameron and the women are prisoners in Big Bear's camp. The other men at the Fort were all shot."

"The police!" gasped Bob.

"No. Police got away. The white people at Frog Lake were not afraid of the Indians but claimed that the Indians feared the police. They felt that if the police would only leave, the Indians would quieten down and there would be no more trouble. So loading

their ammunition and supplies into sleighs the police drove away in the middle of the night. Next morning when the Indians found out that the police had fled in the night they were very angry. They shot the men and set fire to the fort."

Bob sighed. "Too bad," he muttered. "Tell me about Frog Lake. How big was it?"

"Not very big. The settlement was in the middle of the Wood Cree Reserve. Wood Crees do not fight, so the people were not afraid. There was a Hudson's Bay Trading Post, Police Barracks, Catholic Mission, store, blacksmith shop; a grist mill was being built. And there were the homes of the white settlers who worked."

"You say the men were shot?"

The breed nodded. "All but Cameron."

"Tell me, why didn't they shoot Cameron?" asked Bob.

"Don't know. He worked for the Hudson's Bay Company; the Indians liked him. He was always fair with them and then he is a very young man."

"Is the fort still standing? Did you say?"

"No. Burned. When Big Bear's young men saw the signal fires they were not scared any more." The breed sighed. "All men mad. This fighting is no good."

Bob looked at his companion in surprise. "You think that?"

"Yes."

"Still you carry a rifle. I think that; I carry no rifle."

"You're crazy," remarked the breed. "Someone will shoot you, you can't protect yourself."

"Before I left home I promised my son I would not fight the Indians. I am going to keep that promise."

The man grunted, rose slowly from the ground, walked to his horse and mounted without speaking. Then, "Thank you for the meat," he said. "Don't trust Indian or half-breed." He turned and rode away.

Bob sat for some time deep in thought. It was early April and there was the breath of spring in the air and neither sound or movement disturbed the peace of the countryside. "I'll continue to Frog Lake and see if I can't help this man Cameron escape from the Indians," Bob told himself.

Very early one morning, a few days later, he was lying on his stomach in a clump of willows, watching the preparations of Big Bear's young men. Since coming to the prairie Bob had learned enough Cree to understand that they were planning an attack on Fort Pitt, where Captain Dickens (son of the novelist, Charles Dickens) was in charge. The rescue of Cameron would have to wait. He must get to Fort Pitt and warn Dickens.

Even though Bob knew that the need for haste was urgent, he was fascinated by the scene which



Bob felt that he had entered another world.

spread before him and could not tear himself away. It was pagan pageantry in all its savage beauty. The setting was perfect. The distant hills, the blue water of the lake, the Indian camp - with its painted canvas tents--and the Indians themselves in their war paint and feathers made Bob feel that he had entered another world. The young warriors were mounted and dressed for battle. The horses appeared to have caught something of the excitement of the moment. They danced and pranced, reared and champed at the bit in their eagerness to get away. As the warriors advanced, their blankets billowing from their shoulders, Bob could see that they wore fringed jackets, their leggings and moccasins were heavily beaded and their faces, made hideous with red paint and markings of yellow ochre, gleamed savagely in the morning light. Bob shivered, listening to their weird war chant as they rode around their camp--then with a wild cry and a blast from the guns they gave the horses their heads. The excited animals broke into a mad gallop. The party of savage warriors was on its way to Fort Pitt.

Bob knew it was time for action. He slid along the ground like a snake till he came to the clump of poplars where he had tied his horse. He untied the animal, mounted and went dashing along the river in the shelter of the poplars, hoping that the war party was too preoccupied to notice him.

In the early afternoon Bob saw that the Indians had come to a halt. He swung to the ground and tied his mount to a small sapling, sufficiently strong to hold him for a time but in the event of no one finding him the animal could easily break loose.

"Now, Bob Currie, watch your step or you won't come out of this yourself much less warn Captain Dickens," he told himself. He lay in hiding for some hours a short distance from the Indian camp but could make out little of what was going on between the camp and the fort. Then becoming tired of waiting, he slid

along the ground a few paces and stopped to listen as he heard hoof beats pounding down on top of him. His face in the dust, he pushed himself as tight as possible against the earth. A horse's hoof brushed his left shoulder as it thundered by. A shot rang out. Bob peered with one eye through the willows. He saw in a flash what was happening. A policeman, on scout duty from the fort, was being pursued very closely by an Indian. The Indian lost control of his mount and it crashed against the scout's horse. They piled up the two horses, the Indian and the wounded policeman. In the confusion the Indian escaped.

To Bob's amazement he saw the policeman rise and waving unsteadily make for the fort. The fort guns ceased firing. Then like something shot from a gun Bob was on his feet and regardless of danger, he, too, raced for the fort. When the gate opened to admit the wounded scout Bob slid inside. For sometime no one noticed him, all attention being centred on the wounded man. Then one of the guards saw him.

"Hello, where did you come from?"

"I just dodged in. I was with Commissioner Irvine, from Regina. Name's Currie."

The guard's eyes went wide with astonishment. "How did you get to Fort Pitt? Not such a pleasant spot at the moment."

"I came to warn you not to surrender to that band of Indians out there. They intend to lure you out of the fort and then shoot you down like cattle."

"How did you know that?"

"I listened in on a council meeting on the shores of Frog Lake. They didn't know that I was hiding in the willows while they made their plans."

"They did try, this afternoon, to persuade us to surrender but we didn't bite. The Hudson's Bay factor went out to parley with them. They kept him. Made him write a letter to his wife asking her to join him. A short time ago, everyone connected with the Hudson's

Bay Company followed the advice of that letter and twenty-eight people voluntarily gave themselves up to the Indians. There is no one left in the fort but the mounted police and yourself," he added.

"What are the police going to do?" asked Bob.

"There's no use trying to hold this fort now when we might help with the defence of Battleford. We've built a scow for just such an emergency; so we're going to try the river," the guard replied.

"The river! It's a torrent! The ice has just broken and it's coming down in floes as big as a house. They'll smash you to pieces before you get the length of the scow."

"It's a risk we'll have to take. Big Bear has secretly offered us a twelve-hour truce. He'll do his best to hold his young men off until morning. With luck we'll be across before that. They won't try to follow us across that river. Want to try it with us?"

"I certainly do. I don't want to face that mob alone."

Captain Francis Dickens gave orders for the scow to be launched. Under cover of darkness the little party slipped out of the fort and down to the river. The new scow, which had never before touched water, leaked like a sieve. A constable jumped on board and shouted, "I'll take her across, sir." With what ammunition and provisions they could carry (the rest was destroyed), Bob and the Mounties with their wounded companion, stepped aboard the scow with but scant hope of reaching the other side. The constable took charge. "Get those pails going. If you love your life work for it."

The scow was battered from side to side by the swift, ice-laden current. At times it was lifted clear of the water; again it was almost submerged and part of the load went overboard. To add to their discomfort, shortly after they embarked it started to snow. When they finally reached the opposite bank a mile down the river they were soaked through, their blankets were

wet and they dare not build a fire, even if they could have found anything dry enough to burn. Cold and wet, the little party huddled in the shelter of a few poplar trees. At the break of dawn they again took up their fight with the river.

"Pole for your lives, you river rats," shouted the constable. With song and joke they tried to keep up their spirits but it was grim work. After a five-day tussle with the ice-jammed river they had covered the ninety miles from Fort Pitt to Battleford and pulled into the fort to the welcoming strains of the police band. The ladies served them an excellent, hot dinner and took charge of the patient who had stood the hardships of the trip without a murmur.

Bob began to think of home. The Indians now had so many prisoners that it would be impossible to rescue Cameron. He might only endanger the lives of the other prisoners. When he explained to Captain Dickens that he was a free lance scout the captain gave him a horse and he started out alone for Prince Albert. Here he was given a despatch for Governor Dewdney in Regina. With a fresh horse, a knapsack of food, and the despatch carefully tucked under the insole of his left shoe, Bob started for home.

At first he travelled very cautiously, sleeping mostly by day and travelling by night. But as the days passed and he was leaving the fighting behind he became careless. One night as he settled for sleep in a clump of willows he thought, "Two days at the most and I'll be home." He went to sleep with a smile on his lips thinking of home. Something wakened him. He lay for a second without opening his eyes. He knew he was in trouble.

When he did open his eyes he looked into the painted face of a red skin.

In the description of the preparations of the Indians for the attack on Fort Pitt, and the escape of the Mounties from the Fort, I am indebted to W. B. Cameron's "*Blood Red the Sun*," (Chap. XIII to XV).

"Get up," ordered the Indian. "Come."

Bob obeyed with a sinking heart. Why had he slipped up this way? When he moved from the shelter of the willows he discovered that he had spent the night on the fringe of an Indian encampment, consisting of a number of young braves, half a dozen old men and a couple of women who were busy with a kettle slung over a fire. From the centre of the circle an ugly looking warrior, with his rifle in his hand, glared at Bob.

"Good morning, friends," Bob greeted them, his gaze travelling around the circle.

"Where you from?" growled the warrior.

"From the north. I am going home to my farm."

"You came from police?"

Bob looked the Indian straight in the eye as he answered. "Yes, I came from the police and I am going home to my farm."

The Indian pointed the rifle at Bob's heart. "You not go home. You work for police. I kill you."

A hand shot out and struck the rifle. The gun exploded but the bullet passed through Bob's left arm instead of his heart. A tall man had placed himself between Bob and the warrior. "You not shoot him," said the tall man.

Bob looked up. "Why, Scarface!" he exclaimed.

Scarface grunted and motioned the warrior away.

With the help of Scarface, Bob managed to bind his injured arm with strips of his shirt sleeves. The Indians searched him for any message he might have from the police but found nothing. They took his knapsack of food and his horse. Now he was forced to go along on foot with the women and the old men. Each day the wounded arm became more painful; he could not eat the food they prepared and his temperature climbed daily.

One night he tossed on his buffalo skins talking incoherently...

CHAPTER XXII

A RIDE IN THE NIGHT

For some time after Bob's departure Mort rode to town every day seeking news. He was able to learn something of the northern part of the country. He learned there were many Hudson's Bay posts scattered throughout the north land, which was considered much more beautiful than the southern prairie. Game was more plentiful and there was still a fairly brisk trade with the company. This was one reason why the freedom-loving breeds had chosen to settle around these northern posts.

But from the first the news that filtered in from the north was all bad. Shortly after the detachment left Regina the temperature had dropped to forty below zero. Mort and his mother, enjoying the warmth of their own fireside, hated to think of the men out on the road.

The only news the people in town were able to get was from wandering breeds or Indians. Mort noticed the Indians he met about town were becoming less friendly.

There was always work to be done and Mort and his mother welcomed it as a way to pass the time. It was now past the first of May and still no word from Bob. The chores were finished and Mort and his mother were relaxing after the day's work, when Mort became conscious of a faint sound outside. He snapped to attention. His mother looked up from her knitting.

"I'll see if it's Jane," Mort volunteered.

His mother smiled and nodded but they both knew it was not Jane.

Outside Mort recognized Little Bear standing in the shadow of the house. "Oh, Little Bear," Mort began but the other put up his hand for silence.

"Come," said the Indian.

"Won't you come in Little Bear? It's been so long since we've seen you."

"I come for you. Do not tell your mother."

"I must tell my mother. I cannot go with you and leave her alone."

"Tell her your father needs you."

"Where is he, Little Bear? Is he all right?" Mort's voice was shaking.

"Will be when we find him. Hurry." The Indian spoke with authority.

Mort went into the house slowly, closed the door and stood leaning against it looking at his mother.

"Well," she said, "who was it?"

"Little Bear. He wants me to go with him to get dad." Mort was watching his mother's face closely.

She turned pale and rose to her feet. "How is he, Mort? Is he well?"

"I don't know. We are to go and find him. Will you mind being left alone?"

"Don't ask silly questions. It makes no difference whether I'm alone or not. Go and find your father."

"Oh, Mom, I hate to leave you." Mort told her. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"I'll be fine and you'll be safe with Little Bear and perhaps it won't be long now until we have your father home again. Be careful, Mort." She smiled a little unsteadily.

There was no moon but the sky was clear. The two horses were in fine fettle and started off at a lively trot. Mort was anxious for news but he had learned that an Indian does not talk until he is ready and Little Bear seemed to be in no mind for talking.

The night was beautiful; the air was full of the perfume of growing things bursting into life. The music of the frogs and the occasional call of a night bird reminded the boys that they were not alone in the night.

Finally Mort ventured to ask, "Where are you taking me? Where will we find my father?"

"Him wounded. Indians have him. Prisoner. Indians not hurt him."

"Gosh, I hope not!" The words exploded. "Is he badly wounded?"

"Don't know."

"Why are the Indians mixed up in this fighting anyway? Didn't Big Bear promise to stay on his reserve and stay out of the fighting?"

"Yes, but the young men mad. Big Bear can't stop. He warn Captain Dickens at Fort Pitt. He try to help."

"I wish I could meet Captain Dickens. He is the son of a great writer," Mort told Little Bear.

"Dickens like Indian. He walk in woods alone, with gun. Not talk much," Little Bear told Mort.

When the boys stopped at the store in Craven there was only one man on duty and he let them curl up on some buffalo skins behind the counter to sleep. With the return of darkness the two boys moved on towards Kane's Point, on Long Lake. They had been given sufficient pemmican and biscuits to last them several days. Before leaving Craven they learned that the store at Kane's Point had been looted by a band of Indians and that the Indians were still camped in that vicinity. Little Bear hoped that he was on the right track.

Mort began to feel that he was in alien territory and that it would be necessary to move with the greatest caution. At Kane's Point the boys found a good sized camp set well back among the trees and at some distance from the lake. Numerous ponies were grazing between the camp and the lake. The odd scout was on the move, but otherwise the camp was still.

Mort raised no objections when Little Bear suggested that he remain behind to guard the ponies in a clump of bushes. Even though he had learned a great

deal from Little Bear, he knew that he still was no match for the Indian in scouting. To Mort the time of waiting seemed interminable. When Little Bear finally loomed up beside him he had not heard a sound.

"Did you find him?" asked Mort.

The Indian's face told him nothing. Then slowly Little Bear nodded.

"Is he well?"

"No, he is not well. He throws himself about and talks in his sleep."

"Let's do something. Don't just stand there."

The Indian looked long and hard at his friend. "Your father cannot walk. We must get help."

"We can't get help. We've got to get him away from here before daylight. We can carry him," Mort pleaded.

"Must get someone in camp to help us," Little Bear insisted.

"Can we trust anyone in the camp?" asked Mort.

"Scarface there."

"Oh, no, not Scarface of all people. He doesn't like me."

Little Bear grinned. "But he like your father. I talk with Scarface. He waiting for us at edge of camp."

Mort sighed. "I hope you haven't made a mistake."

The boys' eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and they moved along quite easily. Everything in the camp, the ponies, the dogs, the men, appeared to be sleeping. Scarface was on hand to guide them to the spot where Bob was tossing on his pile of dirty buffalo skins. A dog barked and the three adventurers dropped flat on their stomachs scarcely breathing until all was quiet again; then Mort stepped on a twig and it sounded like a cannon exploding—again they lay prone.

Finally they reached the teepee where Little Bear had seen Bob. Scarface pulled out the tent pegs and



Scarface drew the buffalo skin with Bob on it, into the open.

reaching in drew the buffalo skin, with the man on it, into the open. Then he pushed the pegs back into place and tried to remove all markings from the ground, so as to leave no clues.

In the dim light, it was hard for Mort to realize that the emaciated figure on the robe was his father. He and Little Bear, each at a corner, lifted the shoulders while Scarface took the feet. When Bob felt himself being lifted he jumped to a sitting position and struck out with his good arm. Mort's hand covered his mouth before more than a half sound escaped. Bob was too weak to put up much of a fight and fell back mumbling.

Mort realized that his father was in a raging fever and delirious. They must get him to safety quickly and as their burden was not heavy the three moved along smartly. Mort had brought a clean Hudson's Bay blanket and rope. They wrapped Bob in the blanket and laced it with ropes like an Indian papoose. Taking the buffalo robe they made holes in the two sides. Then the boys stretched the skin between the two ponies in the form of a hammock, which they strapped to the ponies by passing the ropes under their bodies. They lifted Bob onto this improvised hammock and held their breath hoping it would hold. His feet and legs, from the knees, hung over the lower edge. Very cautiously the two boys, each leading his own horse, started down the trail towards home. Scarface accompanied them a short distance and before turning back to the camp he told the boys of a settler's home five or six miles up the road and suggested that they ask there for shelter for a few days.

"But what if the Indians start searching?" asked Mort anxiously.

"They will not search much, just a little maybe. The Indians getting plenty frightened of your father."

"Frightened? Why?" asked Mort.

"Him bad medicine. Him die, evil spirits follow Indian camp. They not look much."

Bob was very quiet during the trip and the boys had no idea whether he was asleep or awake. The blackness of night was just beginning to turn to the grey of early dawn when the strange conveyance stopped in Alex North's yard.

The Norths knew Bob Currie and were only too pleased to render any service they could. When Mort saw his father in the light he could hardly believe his eyes. Bob's hair and beard were so long that they almost covered his face. Mort gazed in bewilderment for some moments. Then his feet dragged as he made his way to the washstand where the hand basin was kept. He filled it with cool water and prepared to bathe his father's face. As he continued to bathe face and hands the patient became less restless.

Mrs. North boiled water and bathed and bandaged the injured arm. The bullet had gone through the fleshy part of Bob's arm and the wound would not have been serious if infection had not set in. She managed to get him to drink a brown bitter tea made by brewing a certain prairie herb, which she claimed would bring down the fever. When the boys suggested riding to town for Dr. Cotton, Mr. North persuaded them to wait a while.

The cabin was a one-roomed shack like the Curries' but with a loft overhead. For the sake of safety it was thought best to take the patient upstairs. The boys scrambled up first and then Alex North, with Bob slung over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, climbed up to the entrance. The boys lifted Bob through the opening and made him as comfortable as possible on a prairie wool mattress and blankets.

For several days Indians seemed to appear from nowhere, loiter for a time and pass on. During this time Mort sat by his father's side keeping a cool cloth on his forehead, bathing hands and face and chest. He lost all track of time. Gradually his father became less restless.

Once while Mort was on duty he fell asleep. When he came to with a start it was already dark in the loft. He noticed that his father was still, his breathing soft and measured, his brow cool-- he slept. Mort smothered his face in the pillow to force back the sobs that rose to his lips. He knew now that his father would get well.

When Bob wakened he had some hot beef broth and in a couple of days it was decided the little party should start for home. Mr. North trimmed Bob's hair and beard and he looked like a new man. The Norths lent the boys a light wagon and a set of shagginappi harness.

They were bidding their friends good-bye when the sound of a horse galloping and a voice shouting reached them from the yard.

Mort turned pale. "They've come," he whispered. "After all this time, they've come."

Bob smiled. "That doesn't sound like a war-cry to me."

The boys pushed past the others into the open. There they saw a rider, his horse black with sweat, waving his arms and shouting, "It's over! it's over!"

"What do you mean?" shouted Mort.

"The rebels were defeated at Batoche on the eleventh of May and yesterday Riel was captured. The settlers are already starting back to their homes."

"Do you mean it? Can it be true the fighting's over?" asked Mort.

"True enough."

"How did it happen?"

"Soldiers," replied the rider. "The Red Coats did a good job but there were too few and the settlements were scattered. They didn't have a chance. Now the country's overrun with troops from the East. Dumont has escaped so far but they'll catch him before he gets to the border."

"Get down and I'll take your horse to the barn. You go in and Mrs. North will give you something to eat," Alex North told the rider.

It was with light hearts that Bob and the two boys started out towards the Currie home.

CHAPTER XXIII

HOME AGAIN

The trip home was uneventful. On his bed of straw and buffalo robes Bob rode in comparative comfort. There were sloughs and streams to cross and at times the shagganippi harness stretched until the boys were alarmed that it might leave them in the middle of a slough, but it had held.

On reaching Regina they went at once to Dr. Cotton, who pronounced the patient out of danger and doing well. Poor food and infection had caused the fever which had so nearly cost Bob his life.

"Sleep and good food is what he needs most," the kindly doctor told them.

Before leaving Regina, Bob sent the boys to Governor Dewdney with the despatch from Commissioner Irvine, even though he knew it would be of little value now that the rebellion was so nearly over.

As the little party drew near the farm they could see Jane and mother standing near the corner of the house. Maggie's eyes were heavy with watching but her head was high; her faith had never wavered. She had been confident the boys would bring Bob home.

As they drew near mother came forward eagerly to greet them. Bob was sitting up and grinning at her over the wagon box.

"How are you, Bob? I knew the boys would bring you safely home." Maggie's voice trembled and she brushed the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I'm a silly old thing. They're just tears of happiness. It's been so long, Bob."

"It's over now and we're all home again. In a very short time I'll be right as rain; anyway, it's a poor institution that can't afford one boss."

The boys helped him out of the wagon but he insisted on making the house under his own steam.

Mother had a pot of soup on the stove and soon the whole family were seated around the table enjoying it.

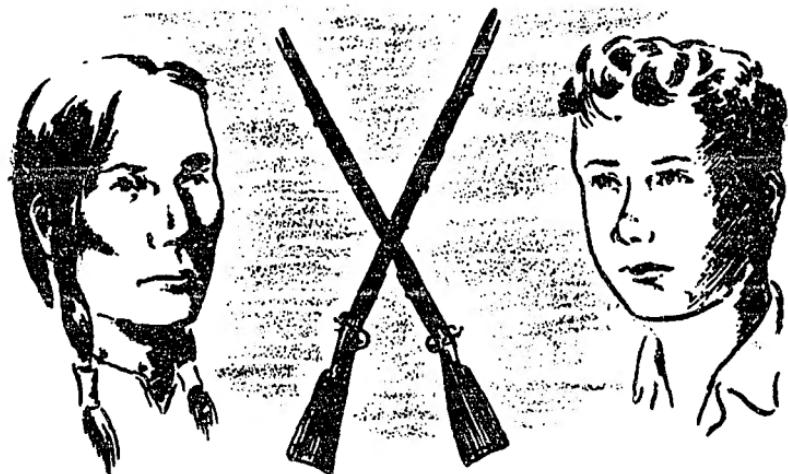
There was much to talk about. Bob wanted to know how they had managed the seeding.

"Well, I see where I can take a trip back East any time I like. I'm not needed around here," Bob told them.

"We'll see about that; won't we, Mort?" replied mother.

The time passed quickly. Finally Little Bear announced he must get back to his people.

Bob rose and placed his thin hand on the young Indian's shoulder. "My boy," he said in his old hearty way, "if we live to be a hundred, the time will be far too short to show our gratitude to you. You have been what man desires most in life--a true friend. May we see you soon and often."



Brothers under the skin.

"No, no, my people did wrong. I only saved you from my people."

"Who's to say where the wrong is—history may tell but with friends it makes no difference."

The young Cree mounted his buckskin pony and dragging the empty wagon behind him rode into the sunset where the sky, ablaze with vermillion, rose and gold, gave promise of a fine day tomorrow. The white boy stood on a small hillock, his gaze followed the diminishing form of his friend, his hand raised in salute he murmured softly, "If Manito thinks, we will meet again."

